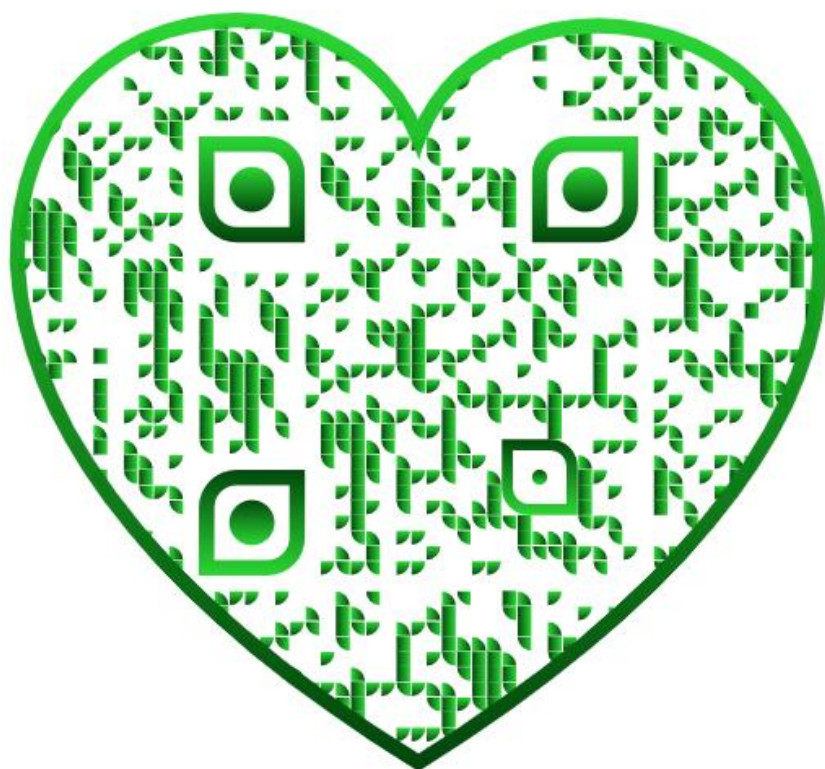


MAMORU HOSODA



M I R A I



M A M O R U H O S O D A



M I R A I



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MIRAI

MAMORU HOSODA



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Mirai
Mamoru Hosoda

Translation by Winifred Bird

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MIRAI

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FOREWORD

by Mamoru Hosoda

Mirai is a film inspired by my own children, especially the reaction of my oldest boy when his new baby sister arrived. It was both adorable and fascinating the way he cried, as if she were stealing our love, and I wanted to turn it into a movie.

I was an only child, so I didn't really know what having siblings was like, and so was my own son when you think about it. But then we had another kid. The moment he had a sister, he ceased to be an only child.

It's fascinating how a child tries to take back the love stolen from them when this happens. I truly believe that life is all about love, that everything ultimately comes down to it, and I think the first opportunity many children have to realize that is the birth of a sibling. The moment the baby is born, they find themselves in a competition for their parents' love. How they progress from stealing affection from each other to finding a new way of loving is, I think, the theme of the film.

The main character, Kun, is a four-year-old boy because I thought that four was the proper age for a story about the birth of a sister triggering a first identity crisis. Also, I was visiting the home of one of this film's producers, Mr. Adachi, and found his children in the middle of a furious war. At the time, his eldest girl was four, so that was also an inspiration (lol). Witnessing the intense love-hate struggle made me think, *I should make a movie out of this*.

When I started writing the novel version of *Mirai*, the thing I struggled with most was how to write from the perspective of a four-year-old boy like Kun.

When I asked Mr. Adachi, who also served as the novel's editor, how I should write this, he immediately said, "Just do it in third person." I wasn't so sure (lol). Knowing it was going to be hard, I threw myself into it and somehow managed to write through it. I owe Mr. Adachi everything (lol). But it was a real struggle for a while there, honestly. I tried writing from the perspective of an older Kun and from the perspective of another character (for example, Kun's father), but each time I ran into scenes the character didn't witness. So

I ended up writing it in third person after all.

The entire story takes place inside a very small house, so perhaps it might appear to be the smallest-scale film I've made, but I think that means it will reach audiences from any country in the world. The very fact that the story is limited to a single house and yard makes it easy to identify with, and all the elements add together into a film that people from around the world will be able to enjoy.

I hope you watch or read this story while thinking of your own family, relatives, or loved ones.

Mamoru Hosoda, director

PROLOGUE

Not so very long ago, atop a hill in the Isogo district, there was once a building called the Yokohama Prince Hotel, and near it, the old E209-type trains with sky-blue stripes would click-clack along the Negishi railway line. If you took National Highway 16 south through the Sugita intersection, past the Japan Agency for Marine-Earth Science and Technology building, up the Aoto hill, and a little farther to the southern side of the slope, you would find a row of large houses standing shoulder to shoulder, competing over which was the most magnificent. On a little piece of land squeezed between two of these grand residences, there stood a little house. The little house had a little yard, and in the yard grew a little tree.

One day, a newlywed couple found the property, and the little house with its little yard and little tree instantly caught their fancy. Yes, it was small, but it was plenty big enough for the two of them, and because it was on a slope, the price was low. They signed a contract on the spot, then handed the real estate agent their camera, stood in front of the little tree and their little house, and took a picture.

They packed their belongings into the husband's red Volvo 240 for the move and began their new life together. Both of them worked in the city until late every day, so they cherished the relaxing weekends they spent in their home. They would read books or listen to music or cook something special for dinner, and sometimes, they would sleep the whole day away and do nothing at all until evening.

The wife, who worked at a publishing house, was a diligent perfectionist with a strong sense of responsibility. She possessed all the personal qualities necessary for making good books, but this meant she was also anxious and prone to worrying about everything, which in turn meant she was quite sensitive to what other people thought of her. Even compliments were interpreted negatively, and she exhausted herself with unnecessary efforts to restore her reputation. These downward spirals were not uncommon for her. All the same, those around her valued and depended on her perfectionism, making it difficult for her to recognize her own nervous temperament.

The husband, employed at an architectural firm, was an

artistically inclined individualist. By nature, he preferred solitude. Consequently, while his strengths lay in his original ideas and refusal to yield to the opinions of society, he was also stubborn and reluctant to listen to others. He was insensitive, in a way, and unlikely to pay attention to anything that didn't interest him. Furthermore, despite his mild nature, he was uncooperative, incapable of taking a hint, and prone to bursts of anger when his rhythm was interrupted, which frequently made him irritable when deadlines approached. In other words, listing his faults was an unending chore.

Clearly, the husband and wife were complete opposites, and they argued over everything from major decisions to the most insignificant trifles. The reason they lived their lives together all the same was most likely because they were compatible—or perhaps connected—by some virtue beyond their personalities alone.

One day, out of the blue, the wife remarked that she wanted a dog. After seeing an English cream dachshund at a pet shop, she had fallen in love. The husband worried that the dog might interrupt his routines, but eventually, he grudgingly agreed. The next week, a puppy joined their household.

The couple never tired of watching their red-collared companion carry around his egg-shaped rubber ball in his mouth. They could talk for hours about how much he'd grown, how much mischief he got into on his daily walks, and how adorable his defenseless face looked when he was sleeping. They felt like new parents.

In their sixth year of marriage, the wife got pregnant.

As her belly grew larger day by day, the husband photographed her progress as if collecting data for a science experiment. They went to the doctor for an ultrasound, and the monochromatic image, striped like a slice of *baumkuchen* cake, revealed a big head and tiny body. Between the baby's legs was clear evidence that it was a boy. When the husband saw the beating heart, his own heart thumped louder in response. Would he be able to provide for this soon-to-be child? But the wife's belly just kept growing, as if to push aside his misgivings.

She took her maternity leave as planned and, in a flurry of activity, began preparing for the birth. A week before the baby was due, she felt her first labor pains. Her mother arrived from the countryside as promised.

Per the midwife's instructions, the expectant mother took a walk around the park at sunset with her husband by her side to help the baby along, panting all the while. Seven hours later, she beamed triumphantly as she snapped a selfie with her red-faced newborn. "You've finally become a mom yourself," her mother murmured, sounding like a traveler having just completed a long journey.

After standing vigil by his wife's bedside through her labor, the

husband was given an important assignment: naming their son. He stood before the infant, arms crossed, and groaned. Not one of the names they had picked out beforehand seemed suited to the little face. The new father decided to start over from scratch. In the short time he was allowed to spend in the maternity ward, he discussed the matter with his wife and finally arrived at an answer.

“Kun.”

The wife agreed. It was a cute name and uncommon enough that people could remember it easily. She called their son’s name: “Little Kun!” On a piece of calligraphy paper, the husband wrote the character for it with a brush.

There was a photo in their album of Kun’s little one-year-old face wedged between his parents’ larger ones. In another, his great-grandfather held Kun during a visit to his great-grandmother while she was hospitalized in Mom’s tiny hometown when Kun was two years old. Of course, this was the same little boy in the other photograph, but he wasn’t remotely the same. In no time at all, the infant had become a baby, and in another blink, the baby had turned into a toddler.

And that didn’t even consider the countless stages during his infancy or the innumerable phases when he was a toddler. The changes were so astounding that the single word *child* seemed an inadequate descriptor. As he grew, his parents wanted to remember every moment along the way, but they could hardly keep up with him from one day to the next. It was surprising—unbelievable even—how easily they forgot who he had been just a short while earlier. All they could do was worry about his present and fret over his future.

When the husband and wife considered what life would be like when he got bigger, they decided to tear down their little house and build a new one. The husband sketched out the plans himself, and scaffolding went up around the little house with the little tree in its little yard. They handed their camera to the contractor, and just like they had that summer day years earlier, they lined up to take a picture.

There was the father and the mother and the dachshund and the little boy, now three.

He had no idea that a new life was swelling in his mother’s belly.

THE DAY THE BABY CAME

White clouds blanketed the sky over Yokohama, promising snow at any moment. Up on the hill, the Yokohama Prince Hotel had long ago been torn down, and in its place stood a row of new apartment buildings. The trains on the Negishi Line had changed from E209s to E233s, and the new long rails for the tracks had silenced the clicking and clacking as the cars passed. Everything was changing little by little, very quietly, so as not to be noticed.

In the space once inhabited by the little house with the little tree in its little yard, a new house now stood. The yard had been reborn as a courtyard, sandwiched between the main house and a detached wing. Repurposed orange tiles were now firmly attached to the roof of the new house. And there in the courtyard, surrounded by the new roof, was the little tree.

It was a cold December day just before Christmas. The little boy was stretching up to look out the window of his playroom. He hadn't even taken off his preschool name tag yet as he rose to the very tips of his toes atop a small table. The name on the tag read KUN OTA.

On the walls of the playroom, pictures he had drawn at preschool hung alongside photographs from his birth all the way up through the present. Each showed him with his mother and father, smiling. One of the photos was from his birthday this past September. He'd turned four just two and a half months earlier. The half-assembled remnants of the toy trains and plastic tracks he'd received as gifts covered the floor.

The boy watched the cars passing by outside the window. He was waiting for Dad's red Volvo 240, but there was no sign of it. His breath turned the window white, blocking his view, so he wiped it clean with the palm of his hand. But when he pressed his forehead against the glass, the warm air rushed out of his nostrils to cloud it again. *Why?* he wondered as he gave it another wipe with his palm.

"I wonder if Daddy's coming soon." He sighed, fogging the window yet again. Outside, a Prius clattered past.

Kun's grandmother stepped down from the living room, her smartphone pressed to her ear.

"Really? That's good..."

A small Christmas tree stood on the dining room cabinet, and twenty-two windows had been opened on the Advent calendar. She slid the glass door to the side, slipped on a pair of sandals, and walked across the courtyard.

"Mm-hmm, we'll be waiting for you. Right. Drive carefully, now." She hung up and opened the door to the playroom. "Kun, your mom is on her way home."

"Really?" Kun asked from his perch on the table. His eyes sparkled happily.

His grandmother squatted down in front of him so they were the same height.

"Yes, really. Are you excited?"

"Uh-huh."

Kun spread his arms wide and jumped off the table with a great leap, planting both hands on the ground.

"Woof! Woof, woof. Woof. Woof, woof. Woof!"

He scampered around his grandmother on all fours, kicking toy trains and tracks every which way. He was so happy Mom was coming home he could hardly stand it.

"Ah-ha-ha, just like a puppy," his grandmother chuckled wearily before offering a suggestion. "Kun, babies love clean rooms. Would you like to tidy up for the baby?"

"Uh-huh."

"Can you do it yourself?"

"Uh-huh!" he said, scooping up the toys in both hands and putting them into the box one after the next.

"I'll let you take care of it, then, okay?"

"Uh-huh!"

"Granny's gonna be upstairs, then."

"Uh-huh!"

Kun was so busy putting toys away that he didn't even look up. She left the playroom and slid the glass door closed behind her.

"Woof! Woof, woof!"

Yukko, the miniature dachshund, barked at the vacuum cleaner and wagged his feather-duster tail.

Kun's mother had gone into labor early, and her own mother had come in from the countryside to help out for a week while she was in the hospital. While Kun's father was getting the house ready for the new baby, Granny had been looking after their dog and son, who had caught a cold. Now she was giving the dining room one last round of vacuuming. Just to be sure everything was clean, she rolled the pet-hair remover over the living-room rug, then counted the clean underwear to make sure there was enough and neatly refolded each

pair. As she did, she took another long look around the house, which still smelled new.

“They sure did build a strange place to live,” she remarked.

It was indeed different from an ordinary house. Usually, when a structure is built on a hill, it’s common practice to create retaining walls and level the ground so it has a flat place to stand. This house, however, was built to follow the slope of the ground, and the five rooms and courtyard were connected to one another like steps in a staircase. The room where the grandmother was folding laundry contained the bath, sinks, and washer-dryer, and it was actually at the top of the house. About three feet below that was the bedroom, and farther down was the living room, and then the kitchen and dining room. Out the sliding glass doors and down another level was the courtyard and its little tree, and one level below that was the playroom. The three-foot drops took the place of partitions between rooms. This meant a person could stand in the bedroom and see all the way down to the playroom or stand in the playroom and see up to the bedroom.

The fact that it was missing walls, a standard component of any ordinary house, made Granny uncomfortable.

The entryway was down a set of stairs from the courtyard. Unlike an ordinary Japanese foyer, however, there was no lowered area beyond the thick wooden door. And instead of removing shoes there, as was customary, the rule of the house dictated they leave their shoes on all the way up to the courtyard and take them off on the mat in front of the glass doors to the dining room. This odd policy, too, irritated her more than a little.

The designer of this “strange” house was Kun’s father, an architect.

“I suppose marrying an architect means you can’t live in a proper house,” the grandmother commented as she swept the foyer. “Isn’t that right, Yukko?” she added conspiratorially.

Yukko had followed her downstairs and was now staring up at her.

“Woof,” he replied.

“Phew.”

Granny climbed the stairs from the entryway to the courtyard again with Yukko, then looked up through the house to make sure all was as it should be. Yes, everything appeared ready to welcome the new baby. With a sigh of relief, she walked back down toward the playroom and slid open the door.

“...Huh?”

She peered around in astonishment. It was so thoroughly

crisscrossed with train tracks, she couldn't even take a step.

"Oh, Kun... This room is even messier than before..."

He had promised to clean it up!

Amid the tracks and tunnels, Kun was holding a train in each hand as if to compare them.

"Hey, which one will the baby like? The E233 or the Azusa?"

"Well, I just don't know." Granny sighed. She put her hands on her hips and gazed out at the courtyard. Making sure Kun overheard her, she remarked, "Oh? Yukko looks like he wants to play in the garden."

"Really?"

"Why don't you go join him?" She ushered him toward the courtyard with both hands.

"Okay!"

Kun threw down the trains and dashed outside.

"Time for Granny to clean up," she said, closing the glass door softly after him.

A train with a sky-blue stripe chugged through a crossing, climbed an elevated track, and traversed a railway bridge.

The baby would be here any minute. There was no time to waste on grumbling. Granny planted her feet on both sides of the bridge and snatched up the whistling train with both hands.

"Gotta hurry, gotta hurry..."

The two googly eyes on the egg-shaped rubber ball stared at Kun.

Beyond them, Yukko, wearing his red collar, stared at Kun.

"Heff, heff, heff," he panted eagerly.

"Ready? Go!"

Kun hurled the mustard-colored ball. Yukko chased after it as it arced through the air, his breath escaping his muzzle in white puffs. He whined in apparent confusion at the ball's erratic bounce off the courtyard wall, but he determinedly chased it down all the same. Grabbing it in his mouth, he ran back to Kun and jumped into the boy's arms.

"Ah-ha-ha-ha!"

The courtyard was about ten long strides across for Kun. Grass had grown naturally on the square patch of ground, and in the very middle stood the oak tree. It wasn't much of a yard.

This particular kind of tree was called a bamboo-leaf oak. Its trunk was a little too big for Kun to reach around with both arms, but it wasn't very tall because it was pruned regularly. Its topmost branches reached just above the roof. Yukko liked to run circles around it and, ever since he was a puppy, had loved it as much as he loved his rubber ball.

Kun gripped the ragged, well-worn toy in his hand.

“Ready? Go!” He threw it again.

Yukko pounced on it as it ricocheted, picked it up in his mouth, and ran back to Kun, taking a turn around the oak tree along the way.

Just then, Yukko looked up at the sky in surprise.

“?!”

Kun did the same. Something white and fluffy was drifting down onto him.

“Oh!” he gasped.

Little white flakes were falling silently through the air. He stretched out his hand, but a light wind blew them between his fingers. He tried standing on his tiptoes, but this made the flakes even harder to catch. Reaching up, he hopped, finally managing to get one.

This time, he was sure he could feel it in his hand. He carefully brought his fist close to his chest and slowly opened it. But the white flake was gone! Only a drop of water remained. Where had it gone? He searched the sky for it.

“...”

The expanse above was filled with countless white fragments, all falling toward him. How many were there? One, two, three, four... It was impossible. Just trying to count them made him dizzy.

Squinting, he could see they weren’t all fuzzy white balls but translucent, six-sided ice crystals. He didn’t need a magnifying glass or a microscope to know that. He’d seen on TV that even though all the tiny flakes appeared identical, each was actually unique. It was hard to believe that of all those millions of crystals covering the entire sky, no two had the same shape.

Kun kept staring upward in a daze. He couldn’t find the right word for what he was feeling, so he whispered the only one he could think of:

“...Weird...”

Suddenly, the *vroom* of an engine jolted him out of his trance.

“Oh!”

It was Dad’s car.

As Yukko howled like a bugle heralding their arrival, Kun raced down the steps and flung open the door to the playroom.

“Kun!”

Ignoring his grandmother as she prepared the bassinet, he climbed onto the table and stood on tiptoe to peer out the window. His breath fogged it up, so he couldn’t see outside.

“Hey!”

Quickly wiping away the steam with his hand, he could make out the roof of the Volvo 240 as Dad parked it. It was backing up and inching forward over and over again. Yes, his dad was definitely

driving.

"They're here?" Granny asked.

Without answering, Kun flew out of the playroom and across the courtyard to the stairs leading to the entryway. Six months earlier, he would've had to ease down the stairs backward, but now he could reach the banister above his head and take the steps facing forward, one at a time.

"Mommy!"

Descending as fast as he could, he called toward the entryway.

"Mooommy!"

The door opened with a bang.

"The princess has arrived!"

Dad was carrying a bag and holding the door open like a chauffeur. A flurry of snow blew into the house.

Kun stopped midway down the stairs and gazed at the door.

"Oh..."

"Hi, Kun."

Mom was cradling a baby swathed in the same pure white as her clothes, and she smiled at him like a goddess.

"Hi, Mommy," Kun replied. "I missed you!" Tearing up, he hugged her legs tight.

"Is your cold all better? I'm sorry I was gone," she apologized gently.

Kun's head suddenly snapped up to get a look at the white baby blanket.

"Is that the baby?"

"Hee-hee."

"Show me! Show me!" He started hopping up and down.

It was indeed the baby.

A week ago, Mom had told him she was going to the hospital and then hadn't come back. Granny had stayed in her place, giving Kun his medicine when he coughed and applying medicinal patches to his back. Dad had taken pictures of the maternity ward on his phone and sent them to his son. Still, Kun hadn't really understood what it all meant.

A snow-white blanket lined the wicker bassinet.

Mom gently laid the sleeping infant into it, then slowly withdrew her left hand from under the baby's neck so as not to wake her.

Kun gazed at the newborn as if something were pulling him toward her.

She was fast asleep, swaddled in clean white clothes trimmed with delicate lace.

She was surprisingly small, like a piece of pressed-sugar candy

that would crumble at a touch. He could see her little chest rising and falling ever so faintly as she breathed. Her head was tilted at a very unnatural angle. Looking at her felt so strange. Babies were dangerously delicate things. All he could do was hold his breath and stare at her in a trance.

“...”

Dad looked over at him and whispered, “That’s your little sister.”

“Little sister...”

It was practically the first time Kun had ever said those words.

Mom glanced at him.

“Do you think she’s cute?” she asked.

Kun didn’t know what to say. To be honest, he didn’t find her cute at all. But how should he answer? He started to reply, stopped, tried again, and snapped his mouth shut. Finally, he opened it again and thought for a moment before eventually mumbling two words.

“...She’s weird...”

Snow silently drifted down onto the oak tree in the courtyard.

The baby was snoring softly. Kun timidly extended his index finger toward her tiny palm, poked it, and then withdrew in a panic.

“Gently, now,” Mom chided.

He summoned his courage one more time, brought his finger close, and softly touched her hand. It was smooth and bouncy, like jelly. He left his finger there in her palm. Her fingers were so little. The nails and wrinkles were tiny, too. He felt like he was touching a miniature version of a delicate, complex human. Who in the world had created this creature?

Just then, the baby’s hand jerked.

“...!”

Kun pulled back in surprise and shrank away from her.

The baby had woken up. She opened her eyelids ever so slowly, like night turning into dawn. Dad whispered to Mom.

“She’s awake. She’s watching Kun.”

“She can’t see him yet.”

“But she’s staring right at him.”

Under the baby’s gaze, Kun felt frozen in place. Her eyes looked vacant, but there he was in their reflection. This strange being was looking at him. It was so weird he could hardly stand it.

“Kun, I want you two to be good friends,” Mom said.

“...Uh-huh.”

“I want you to always look out for her and keep her safe, okay?”

“...Okay,” he replied absently. It was the only way he *could* say it.

Still, Mom seemed reassured. “Thank you, sweetie,” she said, smiling brightly and glancing at Dad and Granny. They were smiling with relief, too, as if their tension had melted away.

Dad sat down on the floor. “Kun, what do you think we should name the baby?” he asked, pushing his glasses up on the bridge of his nose.

The question snapped Kun out of his trance. “Name?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“Um, well, um...” Kun peered into the wicker basket. “Nozomi.”

Dad crossed his arms, contemplating the name.

“Hmm, Nozomi... Interesting. That’s not bad.”

“Or...,” Kun said, peering into a corner of the room, “...Tsubame.”

“Tsubame. Hmm, Tsubame...” Dad turned the word over in his mouth and studied the ceiling. Something about the name seemed to be bothering him. “Tsubame?”

“Those are bullet train names, aren’t they?” Mom asked, pointing with a little smile. Peeking out of the toy box were a Nozomi, the high-speed train connecting Tokyo with Osaka, and a Tsubame, which ran in Kyushu.

“Aha, I get it now.”

Dad smiled as he stood up.

Granny, wearing a down coat, was tying her shoelaces in the entryway.

“I wish I could stay a little longer, but I have to go visit your great-granny in the hospital.”

She knew this was when the family needed her help the most, but she couldn’t leave her mother—Kun’s great-grandmother—alone in the hospital forever. When her father was still alive, he had gone to the hospital every day to look after his wife. After he passed away unexpectedly early the previous spring, though, her mother’s subsequent lack of energy made her anxious. She had asked her husband, Kun’s granddad, to stop by the hospital while she was gone and bring changes of clothes, but she was still uneasy. Maybe if she brought a picture of the baby, that would cheer up her mother.

Her daughter smiled. “It’s okay, Mom. You’ve already done so much.”

“Let me know any time you want me to come.”

“Thank you so much.” Dad dipped his head.

“Say hi to Dad for me.”

“Kun, I’ll come again on the bullet train,” Granny promised.

“Bye-bye,” he said.

“Bye-bye to you, too, baby.”

Mom turned the baby’s head in her direction. “Say bye-bye.”

Granny boarded the train with the sky-blue stripe. Lights sparkled from the windows of the houses on the hills of Yokohama as the train rolled through the hustle and bustle of the city toward Tokyo. In a

little while, she would transfer to the bullet and probably arrive home after eight.

Through the cold, clear air of the winter's dusk, she could see far into the distance.

KUN AND THE BABY

Kun always slept on his stomach with his rear sticking into the air.

“Mmmm...”

This morning, he woke up in his usual position.

Mom was already up. Still in her pajamas, she was sitting on the bed in the dim bedroom with a cardigan draped over her shoulders, nursing the baby.

“Good morning, Kun.”

“Good morning, Mommy,” he answered, his butt still aloft.

The baby was suckling noisily.

With his derriere high, Kun greeted his sister.

“Good morning, baby.”

Dad was in a chipper mood as he bustled about the kitchen.

“Dum dum dum dumm,” he hummed, wearing an apron over his button-down shirt, as if cooking was the easiest thing in the world.

Strangely, though, it was taking him a very long time to cut up a few pieces of fruit. When the kettle whistled, he rushed over in a flurry to turn it off and reached for the handle.

“Ouch!”

It was much hotter than he expected. He shook his hand to cool it down, then reached for the kettle again with a pot holder just as the toaster oven dinged. He ran over to it, opened the door, and grabbed the charred piece of bread with his fingers.

“Ow!”

In other words, he was not at all accustomed to chores. Even the lopsided bow on his apron contributed to his disheveled look.

Kun brought his cup to his mouth with both hands and eyed his father suspiciously. What was going on? Up till now, Mom had always been the one to make breakfast.

He looked across the table. Still dressed in her pajamas, Mom was breastfeeding the baby as her head nodded sleepily onto her chest.

Kun put down his cup. “Mommy, I want more milk.”

Dad stopped buttering the toast and brought the milk over to Kun.

“Here you go.”

“No!” Kun shouted, picking up his cup again. “Mommy, I want a banana!”

Dad put the carton back and took a banana from the fruit basket.
“Here.”

“No!” Kun refused to take it, too. “Mommyyy!”

He banged on the table with both hands to get her attention.

“Whatcha need?” asked Dad, squatting down next to him and smiling brightly.

Kun smacked him in the face. “No!!”

“Owwwwww!”

After breakfast, Dad set about cleaning the house.

He started at the top and moved down, vacuuming the bedroom, living room, and dining room. Yukko howled at him and shook his shedding fur all over the clean floors. Dad made sure to do a pass under the far end of the dining table, where he worked on his concept sketches.

He was much better at this than at making breakfast. Maybe that shouldn’t have been overly surprising, given that he was the one who’d designed the house. He proceeded confidently and efficiently, and when he was done, he raked up the dead leaves in the courtyard.

As an architect, he’d treated the courtyard as the center of the stepped house, with everything else connecting to it. Because the windows and glass doors faced the courtyard and the house was built in tiers, each room got plenty of sunlight even without windows facing the street. Plus, the home was designed so that breezes blew up from the lower rooms to the higher ones. One of the reasons he hadn’t included any interior walls was so he could make the most of the wind and natural light.

He slid open the glass door to the playroom and squatted in front of Kun.

“I’m gonna vacuum, so don’t take out any more toys, okay?” he instructed, pulling apart the tracks Kun had worked so hard to put together and pushing them into the toy box.

Daddy’s the worst, Kun thought. He took a deep breath and yelled loud enough to be heard over the droning vacuum cleaner.

“Mooooooooomyyyyyyyyyy!”

He shouted toward the bedroom above, and the sound traveled all the way across the courtyard, through the dining and living rooms, and into the upper part of the house.

Mom was changing the baby’s diaper on the bed.

“Now, that feels better, doesn’t it?”

Kun ran all the way upstairs to the bedroom and stamped his feet.

“Hey! Didn’t you hear me?”

“Oh, Kun, sweetie. What’s wrong?”

Mom turned nonchalantly to look at him as if having just noticed

him there.

Kun just sighed. It was all he could do.

Dad even swept the stairs leading down to the entryway.

The wooden front door had been inherited from the old house. The wind and rain and sun had aged it, but the battered surface gave the house personality. It was more than just a front door.

Dad had recycled quite a bit of the old house into the new one, starting with the distinctive orange tiles. The plywood doors on the cabinets around the living room and dining room were reused, too. One still bore a light circle on the sun-darkened wood as evidence of the clock that had hung there in the old house. He had purposely positioned that door where everyone could see it. These decisions weren't remotely motivated by a desire to save money.

As an architect, Dad didn't evaluate materials in terms of their age. He knew that "new" didn't necessarily mean "good" and that certain qualities could be obtained only with the passage of time. He didn't see "old" or "dirty" but rather "matured." His perspective wasn't unlike the affection many people have for old clothes they've worn for a long time.

He had adored the original little house they'd lived in. He liked the design, though he had no idea who was responsible for it, and he had enjoyed the time he had spent there with his wife. That was why he wanted the new house to feel like the old one, even if it was newly built. One could even say he wanted to preserve the history of his family's home, however short. He wanted bits of their time there to endure, like geological layers to be unearthed by future generations. Those were his thoughts when planning the house.

At work, however, very few of his clients cared about such things. Usually, they wanted a brand-new house built from brand-new materials. Of course they did.

Finally, Dad stepped out the front door and cleaned the garage. The 1990 Volvo 240 parked there was the same one he'd driven for at least fifteen years after buying it used. He had replaced the radiator, the clutch, and countless other parts so he could hold on to it. Taking good care of things and using them for a long time was an important aspect of his approach to life.

"Congratulations!"

"Oh, thank you!"

Two mothers who lived in the neighborhood had stopped to congratulate the Ota family on their new baby. Dad thanked them from the front door, broom and dustpan in hand.

The woman with the bobbed hair and blue jeans was accompanied by her older son, who went to the same preschool as Kun, and was

carrying her younger son in a baby sling. Before her children were born, she had worked as an independent doll maker, but now she was a stay-at-home mom. The other mom was wearing a knit dress with her long hair in a bun. She was pushing her son, who went to a different preschool, in a stroller and was pregnant with a baby girl due that spring. She had an office job at an insurance company and, like Kun's mother, had continued working after her son was born. Both were good friends of the Otas, and their families often had dinner together. They wanted to know how Kun's mother was doing after the birth.

"The baby must be so cute!"

"Oh yeah. I'd forgotten how tiny they are."

"Everything must be easier this time around, since she's your second."

"Actually, I have a hard time remembering what it was like with our older son."

"I hear you," the mother with the bobbed hair agreed.

"Yumi said she's going back to work sooner this time, right?" asked the one with the long hair.

"Yeah. One of her seniors in the editorial department who's done a lot for her will be starting her own maternity leave soon. She'll go back in time to cover for her."

"And you'll be taking over as househusband, she told us."

"Well, I can't exactly fill her shoes," he said, grinning and waving his hands modestly. "The timing is just good because I recently quit my job to go freelance. I'll only be working at home with a few chores in between."

The women glanced at each other in surprise.

"Wow, impressive."

"It's nothing special."

"You're quite the father."

"No, no, it's really nothing."

"Not many people could handle all that."

"I swear, it's not a big deal."

Even though Kun's father politely brushed away their compliments, he couldn't help smiling.

And so...

"Hm hm hm hmmm..."

Dad was humming and smiling to himself as he prepared lunch. He plunged the noodles into a pot of boiling water with gusto, stirred them lightly with a pair of chopsticks like a professional chef, and put on the lid. Mom watched him coolly, smartphone in one hand, as she nursed the baby.

Dad glanced over his shoulder at her, finally noticing the attention. "...What's up?"

"Nothing important."

"C'mon, you have to tell me now. What is it?"

"Okay, I'll tell you."

"Good."

"You've always had a thing for playing the 'nice father' in front of the other mothers, haven't you?"

"...Huh?"

Dad stiffened, the tension on his face clear.

"But we see right through you."

"..."

Just then, the pot of noodles on the stove bubbled over with a *fshhh*, and the hot water splashed onto the floor.

"Dang it!"

He grabbed the nearest towel and started mopping up the spill.

"That towel is for wiping down the table."

"Oh, shoot!"

He traded it for a floor rag.

"I'm going back to work in March. If you don't get your act together by then—and I mean really get it together, not just for show—we're going to have some problems," said Mom, still holding the baby after feeding her.

"...I know."

"I can't do everything myself like last time."

"...I know."

His face was half-obsured by the kitchen table, and his voice was so quiet she could barely hear him.

"I'm gonna do lots for you."

Kun pressed his cheek against the wicker bassinet and peered in at the baby.

"Fwaah." She yawned as wide as she could with her little mouth.

Kun imagined the two of them playing together on a windswept plateau. "We can go on walks, and I'll teach you the names of all the bugs." He pointed to an insect with big eyes, a long, thin body, and two sets of translucent wings flitting across the imaginary sky. "Dragonfly."

The baby opened her eyes wide.

"And I'll tell you what the clouds look like."

He pointed to a big white cloud billowing in the sky. It looked exactly like a certain spiderlike animal with eight legs, a poisonous stinger at the end of its tail, and a pair of claws for arms.

"Scorpion!"

The baby hiccupped softly.

“And—”

Just then...

“She’s too little to go outside,” Mom interrupted from the dining room. “You can do that when she gets bigger.”

Kun returned to reality with a start and pouted.

“Oh-kaaay.”

He walked away from the bassinet and pulled a picture book from a shelf in the corner of the living room. The words *The Mysterious Backyard* were written in typical handwriting on the cover. A typical little boy in typical pajamas held hands with a typical little girl in medieval clothes in front of a tree in a typical garden. It seemed like a silly book in the style of children’s books from England or America. Kun tossed it aside, pulled another one from the shelf, and ran back to the bassinet. He showed the cover to the baby.

“Hige and the Wicked Witch.”

The baby blinked as if very surprised.

“And then the witch got angry, and her face turned red, and she chased Hige around,” Kun told her, making up a random story as he arranged toy trains around the baby. “Hige ran away and got on an E235 Yamanote train.”

He stuck train-themed collectible cards between her toes.

“The witch got on an E233 Keihin-Tohoku train and chased him. But then...”

Suddenly, Mom ran into the living room, leaped over to him, and thrust out her hands.

“STOP!”

She snatched the baby away. The cards between her toes fluttered to the floor.

“Don’t bother her when she’s taking her afternoon nap!” she scolded as she walked back down.

Kun rocked the bassinet angrily.

“Grrrrr!”

In the kitchen, Dad was anxiously preparing formula for the baby.

Mom kept an eye on him as she slipped nursing pads into her shirt, giving him detailed instructions like “Make sure you measure it right” and “Don’t let it boil.” Since she would be going back to work soon, she wanted her husband to get used to taking care of their daughter. Both dabbed drops of milk onto their arms to test the temperature.

“About like this?”

“Yeah.”

Now it was time to feed her. Dad had never done this before. He

sat at the end of the table and took a deep breath, then lifted the baby from his wife's arms and very timidly picked up the bottle. Right away, she began correcting him.

"Hold it up more."

"Oh, right."

Nervously, he put the nipple in the baby's mouth.

"More."

"More?"

"Put it all the way in."

"All the way?"

"All the way to the back."

"The back?"

"Yep."

"Newborns are scary."

"If you don't get it in there right, she'll end up sucking in air."

Mom was leaning down so far that she almost toppled over. Dad's shoulders were so tense he was barely moving. Both of them were completely focused on the baby. They didn't pay one bit of attention when Kun called "Mommy" or "Daddy" behind them. Of course they heard, but they had no time for him right now.

"She's not drinking very much."

"Give her here." Mom took the baby and gave her the bottle. "You have to do it like this."

"Wow, she's totally different with you."

"Don't forget to burp her when she's done," said Mom, handing her back to him.

He patted his daughter on the back as he'd been told.

"She's not burping."

"Keep trying. There's a first time for everything." Mom tried to encourage Kun's white-faced father. After all, if he couldn't do it, they would be in big trouble once she went back to work.

"Daaaaaddy! Moooooommy!" Kun shouted, rising up on his toes behind them. But they were too busy to notice.

Yukko calmly watched them from downstairs.

The shadow of the tent stretched long and dark in the afternoon sun.

Whenever Kun wanted to be by himself, he holed up in this tent in the corner of the playroom. It was red and yellow, like something from a circus.

He lay on the ground with just his head sticking out. He was pouting, and the look in his eyes was definitely dark. Kun's emotions were always written plainly on his face.

Taped to the wall among the drawings and letters and dried flowers was a certain photograph. It showed a smiling three-year-old

Kun between his mom and dad. Back then, he'd been happy.

I'm not happy now, Kun thought.

Why not...?

Because of the baby.

Right then and there, he made a decision and retreated into the tent.

"Use this laundry soap for the underwear."

Mom was giving Dad the rundown in front of the washer-dryer in the bathroom.

"What about the socks?"

"Use the same one."

Kun observed them stealthily, then crept away. This wasn't how he usually acted. He seemed very serious and had a scheming look in his eyes. The hood of his parka was pulled tight around his pudgy face.

He was definitely up to something, like a little ninja.

He crept down the stairs to the living room, careful not to make a sound, gingerly lifting each foot and putting it down again. Would they notice him? His heart was pounding. He was so nervous he missed a step. "Oh!" he yelped before he could stop himself. Frantically, he clapped both hands over his mouth. *Did they hear...? No, they didn't.* His parents were so absorbed in the washer-dryer they didn't notice a thing.

He found the bassinet and slowly tiptoed over.

He crouched and glared into it.

The baby was inside, snoring softly as she slept.

Dumb baby. She had no idea she was in danger. She was completely at peace.

Kun reached both hands toward her helpless face. His splayed fingers trembled nervously.

"..."

He grasped her ears between his thumbs and index fingers and tugged. They stretched out like rubber bands.

Just like an elephant! He giggled at how silly she looked.

"...Pfft."

Next, he pulled on her cheeks. This time, they stretched like bread dough.

"Hee-hee," he giggled again.

He did it over and over. *Boing, boing, boing, boing!*

"Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

He couldn't help laughing. When he pulled on both cheeks at the same time, she looked like an octopus.

"Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

She was too funny!

He slapped his hand over his mouth in a desperate attempt to keep quiet.

Then, he pressed her little nose down with his index finger. Now she was a pig.

“Hee-hee-hee-hee-hee-hee-hee-hee-hee!”

It was so funny he thought he was going to cry.

Just then...

“Uwaaaaa...”

...the baby screwed up her face, and big pearls formed at the corners of her eyes.

“Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!!”

She was crying at the top of her lungs. Tears rolled down her cheeks and splashed onto her chest. Kun didn’t know what to do. *Wait! If you cry like that, they’ll hear you!* he thought.

“What’s going on?”

Mom had come running from the bathroom and was now standing behind him.

“Uh-oh!”

Kun tried to hide the crying baby behind his back, but of course, that was impossible. Mom towered over him and tersely demanded, “Kun, what did you do? You promised to be good friends, remember?”

“I can’t.” He shook his head.

“Please, for Mommy. I want you to be very, very nice to her.”

His head whipped back and forth over and over as she pleaded with him.

“I can’t.”

“Pretty please?”

“I can’t!”

“Kun.”

He closed his eyes tight and answered her one word at a time in a very loud voice.

“I. Can’t!!”

On impulse, he picked up the Doctor Yellow train from under the table and swung it hard toward the baby.

“!”

Mom covered her face with her hands in shock.

Bam!

The train struck the baby in the head. At first, she just stared as if she didn’t know what had happened. Then, tears began overflowing from the corners of her eyes, and she started screaming like a spark catching flame.

“Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

“Look what you did!”

Mom thrust her hands instinctively toward the bassinet, knocking Kun over in the process.

“Ow!”

“I can’t believe you! She’s just a newborn!”

When Kun saw the fury in his mother’s eyes as she hugged the baby protectively to her chest, he suddenly knew that he had just lost something terribly important. Realizing that something would be impossible to recover, his face crumpled. His hood had slipped back, and tears and snot began gushing like water spilling over a dam. He flopped onto the floor and thrashed like an overturned turtle.

“Wwwwwwwaaaaaaaah!” His shrieks made the baby cry even harder.

“Waaaaaaaah!”

Yukko had run up to the living room and joined the howling.

“Oo-woooooo! Oo-woooooo!”

Dad stood there and watched the mess unfold with bated breath.

“...Gulp.”

Mom shot him a sharp look over her shoulder.

“Don’t just stand there!”

“Uh, right.”

After handing him the baby, she pinned down the struggling Kun with both hands so he couldn’t budge. It was the tactic she used when she wanted to check whether he had done a good job brushing his teeth.

“Kun, you’re the big brother, right?”

“No I’m not!”

“Yes you are.”

“You’re not my mommy!”

“Okay then, who am I?”

“The wicked witch!”

“Wha...?!”

Her face flushed redder and angrier by the second. She was the very picture of the eponymous crone in *Hige and the Wicked Witch*, with pointy teeth and a wrinkly forehead and little horns.

“What?! What did you just say?!”

“Waaaaah!” Kun wriggled out of her grasp and wrapped his arms around Dad’s knees. “Daaaaaddy!”

But the white-faced father had his hands full with his wailing daughter.

“Shhhh, shhhh, good girl, that’s a good girl.” He rocked her back and forth, singing an odd little tune. “Don’t cry, don’t cry,” he continued softly.

Without Dad to rely on, Kun dashed out of the room.

“Grah!”

In that instant, the infant suddenly stopped crying and opened her eyes wide.

“...!”

What in the world had she seen?

THE ONE WHOSE LOVE WAS STOLEN

Still sobbing, Kun ran down to the dining room and flung his whole weight against the heavy glass door.

“Oof!”

He sat on the landing in the courtyard and slipped on his shoes. He started down the stairs but stumbled and hit his nose on the ground. The pain and misery only made him howl harder.

“Waaaaaaah!”

Through his tears, he sputtered unintelligibly.

“I bu-bu-bate ba baby.”

What he was trying to say was *I hate the baby*.

Suddenly...

“Hee-hee-hee-hee!”

He couldn’t tell where the voice was coming from. It sounded like whoever was laughing was trying very hard not to.

Who was it?

When he thought about it, the only people in the house were Dad and Mom and the baby. This was the courtyard, so no one else should’ve been able to get in. All the same, he was sure he heard the unfamiliar baritone of a middle-aged man. The voice started talking.

“Hee-hee-hee... It’s no good.”

“Huh?”

Kun turned around. To his surprise, the little courtyard with its single oak tree was gone, replaced by a completely different view.

Before him stood the ruins of an old Gothic-style church. Its roof had collapsed, so there was no ceiling, and a tangle of vines climbed through the tall, narrow windows that tapered up to pointed arches in the crumbling walls on either side of him. The ruins looked entirely forgotten. All the same, water bubbled from a low, round fountain in the middle of the stone floor. A handsome wooden bench curved around it.

A yard. Yes, this must have been another yard.

A man was sitting on the bench with his legs crossed. Thanks to the sunbeams filtering through the arched windows, Kun couldn’t see him very well, but this person appeared to be the owner of the voice. The man stood and slowly walked around the fountain toward Kun, keeping his head down.

“Let me guess how you’re feeling right now. In short, you’re jealous.”

“Jealous? What does that mean?”

As the man drew closer, Kun was able to see him better. His hair was disheveled, and he wore an old-fashioned light-brown coat, a red necktie, and three-quarter-length pants. Despite his scruffy beard, he spoke in an imperious way. The incongruity called to mind a down-on-his-luck aristocrat.

“Up to now, you had your mother and father’s love all to yourself. But now, that love was stolen from you by a little runt who arrived with no forewarning. You knew you’d get in trouble if you raised your hand against her. Still, you couldn’t resist...”

The man halted and looked calmly down at Kun with a sardonic laugh.

“Ha-ha. I hit the nail on the head, did I not?”

“...Who are you?”

“I am a prince.”

“A prince?”

“Yes. The prince of this house. Or I was—until you were born.”

He didn’t look anything like a prince. What was he talking about? Kun tilted his head.

“You are in the presence of royalty. Kneel before me,” the man commanded, stretching out his arms authoritatively.

“...”

Kun kneeled obediently.

The man placed one hand on his chest, as if basking in a fond memory.

“Ah, your mother and father treated me so well. We were always together. They told me how adorable I was and petted my head... But!”

As his voice abruptly rose, the man circled around Kun threateningly.

“Once you got here, I was pushed into a corner. They traded my favorite food for a discount brand and stopped giving me treats, praising me, or even noticing me. These days, all they ever do is scold me...”

With a sigh, he stopped walking and dropped his head so suddenly it seemed as though his neck would break.

“I realized something then. My love had been stolen away. Do you know what a horrible, miserable, depressing thing that is?”

“No,” Kun answered immediately.

“Really?”

The man leaned toward him, his eyes bulging.

“You don’t, eh? Is that so? Well, no matter. But remember, it

could happen to you. In fact, that day is fast approaching. And I'm glad for it!" he shouted, then marched away in a huff.

Kun had to admit, the prince was right. He'd perfectly expressed all the worries that had accompanied the baby's arrival. But how did he know? Who on earth was he? Maybe...just maybe...if he had to guess...

"Oh!"

Glancing down at the ground, Kun caught sight of the egg-shaped rubber ball. Yes! He could test his theory!

"Huh?"

The prince realized what Kun had picked up, and he turned. Kun tossed the ball with a quick flick of his hand.

"Go get it!"

"Whoa!"

As the ball arced into the air, the man reflexively chased after it. Despite its erratic bouncing, he swiftly caught it and raced back to Kun's side.

"Here you go!" he said, holding it out.

Kun eyed the ball resting on the man's palm, then snatched it up and hurled it in a different direction.

"Go get it!"

"Whoa!"

Once again, the prince speedily retrieved the ball.

"Here you go," he said, holding it out.

Now that he had guessed the man's true identity, Kun grinned.

"What?" the man queried, unable to interpret the smile.

Kun threw the ball with all his might high into the air. While the prince was looking up and waiting for it to fall, the boy hunched down and slipped under the brown coat. Just as he'd anticipated, he found a familiar feather-duster-like tail attached to the man's rear end.

"Thought so!"

It was Yukko. No doubt about it. Without hesitating, Kun grabbed the tail in both hands, throwing all his weight into it, and yanked it off.

"Hey, what are you doing?" The man patted his posterior and looked over his shoulder. Something felt strange. To his surprise, he found Kun holding his tail in his hands.

"Hey! Stop that! Sto—!"

But Kun had already taken aim and jammed the tail onto his own bottom.

The next instant...

...an odd zing of electricity zipped from the soles of his feet all the way up his back. When it reached the hair on the top of his head, a pair of long ears popped out on either side. Long hair sprouted from

the sides of his cheeks, too, and his nose became black and round. He planted both hands on the ground and raised his head.

“Woof!” he barked. He had turned into a dog.

The prince (that is, the tailless Yukko) didn’t know what to do, so he just stood still as a statue. The ball eventually came back down and plonked him on the head, finally bringing him back to his senses.

“Give it back,” he insisted, lunging at Kun. But Kun skipped aside with the agility of a toy breed and darted around excitedly.

Yukko landed face-first on the stone pavement. Without pausing to whine over the pain, he scrambled to his feet and chased after Kun with abandon.

“Wait! Give me back my tail!”

“Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

Kun laughed and scampered happily about the courtyard, unable to contain his amusement at his transformation. He ran around and around the fountain, and Yukko dashed around and around behind him. Even a small dog at full speed isn’t easy for a two-legged human to catch.

Kun could see Dad working in the dining room beyond the glass door. He seemed oblivious to the commotion in the courtyard. He didn’t even acknowledge their noisy chase.

“Woof, woof! I’m over here!”

“Stop playing around and give it back!”

“I don’t want to. I wanna keep playing!”

Kun zipped up the stairs and worked his nose into the crack between the dining room doors.

“Oh no!”

Yukko scurried behind the oak tree. Unwilling to let Mom and Dad see him without his tail, he stretched his hand out imploringly from his hiding place.

“Please don’t!”

Kun ignored him and instead jumped into the dining room, running around like a crazy dog. At the sound, Dad stopped working and peered under the table.

“What’s the matter, Yukko?”

He had called Kun “Yukko.” The boy wanted him to do it again, so he jumped up onto the cabinet and launched himself at the Christmas tree in an attempt to knock it down. Dad stood up, frowning.

“Hey, Yukko! Stop that!”

Kun giggled. Dad thought he was Yukko.

He ran up to the living room, kicking aside picture books as he went. Mom sat up from where she’d been sleeping next to the baby.

“Yukko,” she called. She thought he was the family dog, too! “What’s the matter with him?”

Dad had followed him upstairs and seemed just as confused as she was. "Beats me."

Kun perched on the sofa and looked down at them all.

"I'm Yukko!"

As if in answer, the baby started to cry. "Waaah!"

Kun thought being called Yukko was the funniest thing in the world. Becoming someone else was so fun! It was like he had been set free and the gloomy clouds had lifted.

Yukko, meanwhile, gazed at them mournfully from the other side of the glass door. His self had been stolen.

"I'm begging you, give it back."

The sun was already sinking low. Kun wasn't sure when it happened, but the courtyard was back to normal.

"Whiiiiine."

Yukko, now a dog once more, licked his tail affectionately and whimpered. He glared resentfully at Kun, but the boy ignored him.

"Woof, woof!" As Kun did his best impression of Yukko, Mom and Dad watched their cheerful son with surprise.

"Sheesh, a little while ago he was throwing a tantrum like a baby, and now look at him."

"He may be stubborn, but he does recover quickly."

"I'm not acting like a baby. I'm acting like Yukko."

"Well then, do you understand what Yukko is saying?" asked Mom.

"Uh-huh. He says he wants yummier dog food," Kun said, acting as spokesperson for the sulky dog.

"Oh, is that so? I see. In that case, I'll go buy him some new food," Dad said with an ironic smile as he got to his feet. Yukko raised his head, his eyes sparkling.

"Woof!"

Yukko seemed to approve of the new food Dad bought for him. As soon as his dish was set on the ground, he wolfed down every last bite. Dad watched him till he was done, then started on dinner for the humans. Tonight's menu was tuna sashimi and sausage soup, two of Kun's favorites, and the little boy pranced around contentedly as his father cooked. His mother smiled in relief as she watched him.

After dinner, everyone took a bath together, and Mom delegated the task of washing the baby to Dad. Supporting her neck in the water with one hand, he gingerly wiped between the wrinkles on her neck, arms, and legs with a washcloth as Mom taught him the ins and outs from the bathtub. Kun poured water back and forth from a set of cups to make his wooden toy fish swim.

When he got out of the bath, he put on clean underwear. After a round of breastfeeding, the baby fell right to sleep. Kun must have been tired, too, because he started snoring almost as soon as he lay down next to his trains.

The stepped house was finally quiet.

In the dim dining room, Mom was in her pajamas, spreading butter onto a pancake stuffed with sweet red beans. She picked it up in both hands and took a giant bite.

“Mm. Oh boy, this is perfect.”

Dad was worriedly looking at his laptop screen, a towel draped over his neck.

“Am I really going to be able to take over from you?”

“Why? Because she won’t let you feed her?”

“When I hold her, she never stops crying, but when you hold her, she’s perfectly quiet.”

“I’m not surprised things are hard for you. You didn’t lift a finger when Kun was a baby.”

Dad stopped typing in surprise and closed his laptop apologetically.

“I’m sorry. I escaped into my work,” he said.

“But somehow you were always trying to please me.”

“Ha-ha. I’m a terrible father, aren’t I?” A bead of nervous sweat ran down his neck, and he rubbed the back of his head ruefully.

“I just thought men weren’t interested in babies,” Mom replied, as if reflecting on what had happened. It had been a difficult time for her. Really, truly.

“But I’m sure interested now.”

“Really? You’re joking, right?”

Dad suddenly gave her a hearty grin and pumped his fists up and down like a muscle man. Mom was taken aback.

“Really! Super, super interested!”

“Now I know you’re joking,” she said with a weak smile as his theatrics continued.

“See? Ha-ha-ha! Look, look!”

“Ha-ha-ha-ha...”

Then they were both laughing.

“Oh, wait.”

Suddenly, Dad stopped pumping his fists, took out his phone, and typed something on it.

“What are you writing?”

“Something I thought of just now.”

Her own smartphone buzzed. She picked it up and looked hard at the word on the screen.

“Whatcha think?”

“Hmm...I like it.”

“It kinda shows the way forward.”

“Yeah. I think it’s good.”

Both of them stared at their screens for a little while.

Kun was sleeping on his stomach with his rear end held high.

“Mm...”

He opened his eyes. Slowly, he stood up and scanned the room. Nobody was there.

“...”

Still in his pajamas, he rubbed his eyes and went down to the living room.

“Good morning, Kun.” Mom greeted him, holding the baby.

“Good morning.”

Dad stopped his breakfast preparations for a moment and walked over to Kun.

“Hey, look behind you,” he prodded.

“...?”

Hanging on the wall above the Advent calendar was a piece of paper with a word in brush and ink.

“What’s it say?”

“Her name. Mirai.”

“Mirai?”

Dad put his hands on Kun’s shoulders and turned him toward the baby.

“The baby’s name is Mirai.”

Kun observed the pouting baby asleep in Mom’s arms. Solemnly, he repeated her name. It meant “future.” “...Mirai?”

Her eyes flew open, as if she knew she was being called.

She hadn’t had a name before, but now she had a brand-new one. Giving someone a name was like sharing some of your strength with them, Kun mused. Still, the word sounded strange to him. *Mirai, Mirai, Mirai*. He repeated it over and over in his head. Then he grinned and said it out loud once more.

“Mirai!”

He thought for a minute, then offered his opinion.

“That’s a weird name.”

The baby glanced at Kun, still pouting.

THE GIRLS' FESTIVAL DOLLS

Here we go!”

Dad was pulling small boxes from a larger cardboard box and lining them up on the dining table. Where the Christmas tree had stood atop the cabinet two months earlier, Mom was setting up a pair of magnificent dolls.

Kun observed the proceedings from the staircase with great interest.

“What are those?”

“Dolls for the Girls’ Festival.”

“Festival?”

Mirai was swaying in the bouncer where they’d put her down for a nap. As Kun’s father unpacked and unwrapped the tiny raised trays and platters that would join the dolls in their display, he answered his son’s question.

“It’s a festival where we pray for little girls to grow up healthy and strong.”

“Ohhh,” Kun said in a silly voice. He tried climbing onto the cabinet, but Mom put a stop to that.

“No. Those are Mirai’s, so you can’t play with them.”

“I want some, too.”

“But you’re a boy, not a girl,” Mom replied, wrapping her arms around him and carrying him away from the dolls.

“Sniff, sniff, sniff.”

Yukko was hopping up toward the dolls and trying to smell them, but Dad rushed over and pulled him away from the cabinet.

“Don’t touch, Yukko! You’re a boy, too, y’know.”

“Whiiiiine.”

When Mirai was born, Mom and Dad had decided to buy a new set of dolls for the Girls’ Festival. After many trips to department stores and specialty shops in search of the perfect ones, they finally chose a male-female pair. They put together the display in the dining room in mid-February, a few weeks before the day of the festival on March 3, and the empty cardboard boxes ended up in a corner of the living room where they wouldn’t be in the way.

March 3 arrived. Although the Girls’ Festival was nicknamed the

Festival of Peaches, there weren't many peach blossoms or other flowers out at that time of year. Mom had managed to find some mustard and quince flowers, which she stuck in a vase as decoration for visitors.

The E233 train rolled down the Negishi Line in the soft sunlight, and not long after, the doorbell rang. Granny and Granddad had come from the countryside to celebrate Mirai's first Girls' Festival.

"Good to see ya!"

"Welcome!"

"Yokohama sure is warm, isn't it?"

Still wearing their coats, Kun's grandparents rushed over to look into the bouncer. With her stuffed bee in one hand, Mirai opened her mouth wide and yawned.

"She's adorable! Girls are so cute when you dress them up. Not like boys," Granny commented.

"I can't believe she's already three months old," said Granddad.

"Her weight's doubled since she was born," Mom interjected, taking the present her parents had brought out of its paper bag.

Granny turned toward her and asked, "Can she hold her head up yet?"

"Yeah, just about."

Granddad took out his tablet and started recording a video.

"Mirai, look at Granddad! Mirai!"

In response, Mirai waved her toy bee and cooed softly.

That was when Kun filled in the tablet's screen.

"Hi!"

"Kun, don't block the view. I'm taking this video for your great-granny," Granddad scolded before filming the baby again. "Miraaaai!"

"Do me, too! I wanna be in it!" Kun insisted, pulling on Granddad's arm.

"Okay, okay."

Kun posed proudly on one leg. With no other choice, Granddad filmed him, but somehow the camera panned naturally back toward his granddaughter. "Miraaaai!"

"Record *me*!" Kun demanded with another tug on his arm.

"Sure, sure." Again, he recorded a little of Kun's one-legged antics, and again, the camera drifted back toward the baby. "Miraaaai... Huh?"

He noticed a red mark on her right hand when he zoomed in. He put down his tablet and took her little hand in his for a closer look.

"What's this? A birthmark?"

"Where?" Granny peered down at the baby.

"Right here."

"Oh, you're right!"

A large, clearly defined red birthmark stretched from the base of Mirai's index finger all the way down to her wrist. Mom sighed.

"She's had it since she was born."

"Did you have the doctor look at it?"

"Yeah. She said she didn't know if it would go away or not."

"Really? If it doesn't, she might be self-conscious about it in the future."

"I know."

As the grown-ups spoke in hushed voices, Mirai's gaze darted back and forth among them.

When the sun went down, Dad took out a large serving platter and put it on the dining table. A pile of festive sushi rice with toppings like shredded egg crepes, young pepper leaves, salmon roe, and raw tuna filled the enormous plate, and they also brought out a clear soup of clams, pepper leaves, and spongy, flower-shaped pieces of wheat gluten. Once everything was on the table, the family gathered around the celebratory meal.

"Thanks for getting all this ready," Granddad said as Dad was sitting down.

"Oh, Yumi cooked it earlier. All I did was set it out."

Granddad started pouring him a beer and replied, "Don't be so modest."

"Oh, thank you!"

"I'm in a good mood because you invited us for the party!"

"You're welcome anytime."

They clinked glasses.

Next to them, Mom and her mother were explaining the dolls to Kun.

"There's a woman doll and a man doll, and they're married."

"Married?"

"Right, like Mommy and Daddy, and Granny and Granddad, and Great-Granny and Great-Granddad."

"Kun, do you remember going to your great-granddad's funeral last year?"

"Uh-huh," Kun said, stabbing a gluten flower with his fork.

"Speaking of which," said Mom, lifting her bowl to take a sip of soup, "is that story about Great-Granny and Great-Granddad true?"

"What story?"

"The one about how he saw her at the Ikeda Clinic and asked her to marry him, but she told him only if he beat her in a race, and then he did, and they got together."

"I never heard that story directly from either of them," Granny replied.

“Really?” Mom leaned forward. “But Uncle Yamato told it at the funeral.”

Granddad interrupted their conversation. “He had a bad hip, so I think the whole story is fishy.”

“You think it’s a lie?”

“Who knows? That’s why we call it a story,” Granny said, closing her eyes and drinking some soup from her bowl. Watching her reaction, Mom sensed there was some truth to the family lore.

She wished she had asked her grandfather about it before he passed. At the end of his life, he spent his time tending his vegetable garden and visiting his wife in the hospital every day. Even at the age of ninety-four, he was full of energy and didn’t have a single health problem. But one morning, he fell down in the kitchen of his house and never got up. A slice of bread was still in the toaster. He must have been in the middle of making breakfast. It was incredibly sudden.

“If I recall,” Kun’s red-faced grandfather said, turning to his wife with a glass of beer in hand, “wasn’t there some kind of story about the dolls?”

“You mean the saying that the daughter will marry late if you don’t put the dolls away right after the Girls’ Festival?” Mom offered with a hint of skepticism. “No one pays attention to that anymore... but how late do they mean, I wonder?”

“They say one year for each day the dolls stay out,” Granny said.

“Oh, please. What are those numbers even based on?”

“It’s just a saying.”

Mirai stared at her grandparents from the bouncer, holding her toy bee in one hand. It was as if she was absorbing the whole conversation.

The screen of Mom’s phone read MARCH 4.

It was 7:24 in the morning.

“Ack!”

Dressed in a suit, she fixed her makeup in front of a small mirror in the dining room and yanked her coat off its hanger.

“I’m gonna be late!”

Years ago, she had made a habit of keeping her makeup in a corner of the dining room instead of in the bathroom. This might have seemed like an oddly cramped place for applying makeup, but she had a reason: She wanted to keep her children in view as much as possible. Unfortunately, she had developed a tendency to get nervous if she didn’t do everything near them.

But things would have to be different from now on. She was returning to work this spring, and she had to count on Dad, who

worked from home, to look after the children. Of course, she was deeply concerned about this arrangement, but she would have to find a way to deal with it.

Slinging a big purse over her shoulder, she hurried around the table to where Kun was munching on his breakfast.

"Kun, Mommy has to go on a work trip today and tomorrow, so I won't be home."

"No!" he objected, screwing his face up into a mournful pout. He threw down his bread and climbed off his chair, chasing after his mother. Dad followed her down the stairs, too, with Mirai in his arms.

"Be good while I'm gone."

"No!"

"Let Daddy know if you need to go potty, okay?"

"Don't leave!" Kun bounced up and down by the front door with a worried look on his face.

Mom smiled warmly back at him and kissed him lightly on the cheek, making sure not to smudge her makeup. She kissed Mirai, too, and Dad.

"Take good care of the kids."

"Will do."

"Mommy, don't go!"

"Oh, and take down the dolls."

"Sure thing."

"Mommy!"

"Okay, everyone, see you soon!"

The door slammed shut.

A junior high boy with smooth, lustrous hair walked past the schoolyard where the little flowers of the winter daphne were in bloom. Despite being on the short side, he made a handsome picture in his high-collared school uniform that accentuated his long neck. A cluster of girls around the same age followed a few steps behind him, giggling excitedly now and then in their sailor-style navy-blue uniforms with red neckerchiefs. Their cheeks were flushed red underneath their winter scarves but not because of the cold. No, it was because they had reached the tender age of first love.

Dad hurried past them, dragging his whining son toward the nursery school.

"I want Mommy to take me! Not you!"

"I know, I know."

From inside the baby sling, Mirai stared at the junior high girls as her family went by.

At this time of day, the sidewalk in front of the nursery school was packed with parents dropping off their children. Kun and his father

got there moments before the gates closed. As Kun changed into his indoor shoes, Dad scanned the day's announcements, then turned right around and headed back up the hill to their house.

When he was washing the dishes, a plate slipped from his hand and shattered.

"Oh no!"

He forgot to pick up all the toys and picture books on the floor before he started vacuuming.

"Shoot!"

He went to do the laundry, but he didn't understand the washing instructions on the tags and had to look them up on his phone.

"Oh man!"

He made formula for Mirai, but she leaned away from him and refused to drink a single drop.

"Dang it!"

He looked at the clock and jumped up.

"Wow—already?"

It was almost time to pick Kun up from school. He took out the leftover sushi from the refrigerator for lunch. It was so hard and cold that when he dug in his chopsticks, the rice came up in one big clump. He took a bite anyway. Still chewing, he buckled the baby sling behind his back.

"Waaaaaahhh!"

Mirai wouldn't stop crying. Was she hungry, sleepy, or just grumpy? He had no idea.

When he arrived at the nursery school, it was already crowded with other parents. Trying to soothe Mirai had made him late. Kun was changing into his outside shoes.

"I don't want you, Daddy."

"I know, I know."

As his son whined, Dad pulled him up the hill to their house.

Back at home, he took his screaming daughter out of the baby sling.

"It's nap time, okay?"

As soon as he put her in the bouncer, she fell asleep. So she had been tired after all.

He very carefully covered her with a blanket, withdrew his hand, and crept away, mindful not to wake her.

"Phew." He sighed as he sat down at the end of the dining table to do some work. He opened his laptop, but...

"..."

...he was too tired to think or make any progress at all. He closed the laptop and lay his head down on the table. The sound of soft snores joined the warm, languid afternoon sun.

“Zzzzz...zzzzz...zzzzz...”

After a few moments, the snores stopped, and silence descended. Dad was perfectly still.

Then...

Suddenly, he jerked up, rubbed his sleepy eyes beneath his glasses, and opened his laptop again. He shuffled through a file of papers, set it behind him, and buckled down to work.

“Hmm...”

He clicked and typed away on the 3-D modeling program.

One of the projects he’d done just after going freelance had unexpectedly won a prize. As a result, although he wasn’t young, he was getting considerable attention as an up-and-coming architect. Projects big and small flowed in from inside and outside Japan, and soon, he couldn’t believe how far ahead his schedule was booked. Despite the prizes and clients and attention, however, he was still doing just about everything by himself at the end of a dining table.

“Daddy, play with me.”

Kun stuck his head out from under the table and put a snack on the edge. It was a crunchy cookie shaped like a dolphin.

“Don’t you want to play with Yukko?”

“No. I want to play with Daddy.”

Kun reached into the bag of assorted sea-creature cookies and placed an octopus and a tuna in a row on the table.

“I thought you didn’t want Daddy.”

“I do want you. Let’s play.”

He put down a shrimp, a shark, and a sunfish and carefully lined them up with the edge.

“Okay,” said Dad, but his eyes were still glued to the screen.

“Let’s read a book.”

“Okay.”

“Let’s watch a movie.”

“Okay.”

“Let’s spin tops.”

“...Okay.”

“...”

“...Okay.”

“...”

“...Hmm.”

Dad was so absorbed in his work that he couldn’t hear a thing. He didn’t even see Kun’s row of cookies. Kun gave up and retreated under the table.

Mirai was fast asleep in her bouncer.

“Mirai.”

“...”

He said his sister's name, but she made no sign of waking up.

"Mirai, have you ever seen a whale?"

He held up a whale-shaped cookie for her to look at.

"...Mm..."

Mirai turned over in her sleep. Kun gave up and ate it.

"I don't like you, Mirai."

He took another cookie out of the bag. It was a whale again. He stared at it, then gave a crafty smile.

Mirai kept sleeping even after Kun rose and walked away.

"...Mm..."

She moaned a little, as if she was uncomfortable.

Of course she was. Her whole face was covered with cookies. Squid, shrimp, sunfish, sharks, tuna, and octopuses had been carefully balanced on her forehead, cheeks, and chin. Under her nose, a whale-shaped cookie gave her a little mustache.

"...Mm..."

She had no idea what had happened to her. She just moaned softly, as if having a bad dream.

Hmm, hmm, hmm-hmmmm, hmm, hmm, hmmmm.”

Kun opened the door to the courtyard, put on his sneakers, and shut the glass door behind him. He felt great. Humming a song and swaying to the rhythm, he climbed down the stairs. Just then, he heard a horrible screeching cry.

Caw. Caw, caw!

A hot, humid gust rushed over him. The air around him suddenly seemed much stuffier, and his skin felt sticky with sweat.

What was this? What was going on?

Kun turned around. Where the little courtyard with the single oak tree had once been was a sight he'd never seen before.

Everywhere he looked was choked with tropical plants.

“...??”

There were West Indian jasmine, elephant ears, giant ferns, box fruit trees, Chinese evergreens, and fishtail palms. *It's a jungle*, Kun thought. There were ruffled fan palms, screw pines, sea mangos, and weeping figs. All the different species were crowded together, climbing over one another as if fighting for space. Kun took in the sights as if he were perusing an illustrated encyclopedia.

Caw, caw!

There was the screeching sound again. Beyond a huge date palm, he spotted two big birds flying side by side. They must have been making that racket. Farther up, he could see a domed glass ceiling with an iron frame, and he realized he was in a greenhouse, not a jungle. He looked down and noticed the paths among the plants were paved with hexagonal tiles.

In other words, this was probably a tropical garden.

“Huh? It happened again,” he muttered. Once more, he'd wound up in a strange place. He stepped forward through the muggy air, looking around.

Crunch.

“...Mm?” He moved his foot. Some kind of crumbs were lying on the tile. He squatted down and picked up a piece between his fingers. It was light brown.

“What is this?”

He saw something else farther ahead, so he stood and walked

toward it. This one hadn't been crushed. The color and shape looked familiar. He snatched it up and shouted, "A whale cookie!"

Still farther ahead, he found an octopus-shaped cookie and picked it up. Beyond that was one shaped like a sea urchin. He took that one, too. It was just like the story of Hansel and Gretel.

"There's another one! And another! Hee-hee-hee!"

Now he was having fun jumping from one cookie to the next and collecting them. Before he knew it, he had strayed from the tile path and was following a soft, mossy trail. He grabbed a squid cookie from the far side of a fern leaf, then reached for a dolphin beyond that, but his hand froze in midair.

A pair of shoes stood next to the cookie.

Kun gaped at the brown leather shoes and the folded-down white socks. A brilliant blue butterfly flitted around them, and he followed it upward with his eyes, slowly lifting his head.

"...?"

A girl dressed in a navy sailor-style junior high uniform with a red neckerchief stood in front of several huge Japanese banana leaves, looking down at him with big, round eyes. The ends of her black hair formed a delicate web on her shoulders. A sailor suit and a banana tree. That alone was a strange combination, but to make it even more peculiar, the girl had a whale-shaped cookie sandwiched between her nose and her pouting lips.

"Big Brother."

"Huh?"

Kun stared at her with his mouth wide.

The girl removed the cookie.

"Stop playing with my face."

Still gaping at her, Kun asked, "Who are you?"

"You've been hitting me and making me cry...but we won't worry about that now."

Sounding a little angry, she sighed and placed her index finger over her lips as if to control herself.

"Right now, the problem is...those!"

She pointed into the distance with her right hand.

When Kun rose and spotted her hand, he noticed a familiar-looking red birthmark on her palm.

"I wonder if she's...", he whispered, eyes wide, "...Mirai from the future?"

Sensing his gaze, the girl quickly hid her hand behind her back.

"Don't look!"

Kun toppled backward onto the pillowy moss, eyes still bulging. The fern leaves swayed softly.

Mirai of the future had been pointing at the set of Girls' Festival dolls.

Kun made his fingers into a pair of binoculars and peered at them, too. On the other side of the dining table, Dad was working at his laptop. In front of the glass doors, the oak tree looked a little embarrassed to be standing among so many tropical plants.

"One year for every day..." Mirai hid behind a Monstera leaf as wide as she was with her arms stretched out. "That's what they say. You probably think one year is nothing, right? But what happens when you add a year every year?" She sounded upset. "Well, what happens?"

Kun looked at Mirai. She lowered her voice as if talking to herself.

"I might not be able to marry the person I like..."

She was referring to what Granny had told them the night before, about how a girl's marriage would be delayed if the dolls weren't put away by a certain date. Kun turned his finger-binoculars toward Mirai and leaned in.

"..."

"Wh-what?"

"Who do you like?"

Mirai flinched and blushed.

"I—I—I was just talking about the future."

"Hey, are you gonna have a race?"

Mirai blocked her chest with her hands as if she was worried about something. "A-a-anyway, we have to get Dad to put away the dolls now."

But...

"No!" His face whipped to the side.

"Why not?"

"Because I don't like you."

"Why not?"

"I can't be friends with you."

Mirai placed her palms on Kun's shoulders and turned him toward her with a serious expression on her face.

"I can't talk to Dad myself, you know."

"Why not?"

"Just because. Please, Big Brother?" She gently shook him. He averted his face again.

"I'm not your brother."

For a moment, Mirai was silent. "Fine." She sighed. "Is that so? I see, I see." She eyed him coldly and raised a finger. "Well, if you won't help me, we'll just have to play the bee game."

"The bee game?" Kun asked, turning back toward her.

Mirai jumped up, stuck her other index finger in the air, and began the chant.

“Wiggle your butt,” she said, swishing her rear end back and forth like a bee. “Go for a strut.” She drew a figure eight with her torso.

“...?”

Kun stared at her odd behavior. She giggled, and the next instant, she was jabbing his arm with both fingers.

“Bzzz, bzzz, bzzz, bzzz!”

“Hee-hee-hee-hee!” The ticklish Kun giggled, twisting to get away.

“Bzzz, bzzz, bzzz, bzzz!”

“Hee-hee-hee-hee!”

He squirmed in agony as the pokes continued.

“Bzzz, bzzz, bzzz, bzzz!”

“Hee-hee-hee-hee!”

It was almost too much, and he wriggled even harder.

Suddenly, Mirai stopped. Freed from her attack, he planted his hands on the ground and panted. She swept her hair back at a job well done.

“Well? Gonna listen to me now?”

Kun turned his flushed, sweaty face toward her.

“Do it again!”

“?”

Mirai blinked in confusion. Kun repeated his request quietly.

“Again.”

Caw. Caw, caw.

The familiar screeching cry echoed from somewhere in the distance.

Click, click, click.

Kun could hear Dad using his mouse. He climbed the steps from the courtyard to the dining room. His father, still absorbed in his work, didn’t turn to look at him.

“Daddy.”

“Yeah?”

“Look at the dolls.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Can we put them away?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Daddy.”

“Yeah?”

It was no use. Dad wasn’t paying the slightest attention to his responses, so he probably wasn’t going to take care of the dolls.

“Aw, man!” Mirai was hiding in the shadows of the jungle when Kun returned from the dining room. “Well, you’ll just have to be a big boy and do it yourself.”

“Okay.”

“Okay”? Oh, whoa, whoa—wait a minute.”

“What?”

“Show me your hands.”

“My hands?”

He stuck out his muddy palms.

“They’re filthy! You’re covered in mud. Don’t worry about the dolls.”

“Why?”

“Because I said so.”

“But why?”

“Because I don’t want you touching them with your dirty hands. Hey, did you just pick your nose?”

“No.”

“I think you did.”

“No I didn’t.”

“I saw you!”

“I didn’t pick it.”

“Don’t say that while you have a finger in your nose! Anyway, never mind. I’m not asking you to do it anymore.”

“Why not?”

“Stop that!”

“What?”

“Don’t wipe it on your pants!”

She sighed. He was hopeless. With a determined look in her eyes, she hunched down and crept forward. Hiding behind a potted agave plant, she glanced at her father, then sneaked behind the oak tree and scurried over to the steps. Hurrying up them quick as a cat, she put her hands on the door and gently pushed it open just wide enough to slip through.

“...”

After sliding off her leather shoes, she stepped into the dining room and quietly peered around the end of the table. Dad was occupied with his laptop screen. Good. He hadn’t noticed her. She glanced up at the dolls on top of the cabinet, then scanned the room as if she was searching for something. Where were the boxes to put them away? She didn’t see them on this floor. So where could they be?

Dodging Dad’s line of sight like a spy, she climbed the stairs and dove into a blind spot. When her head reached the level of the living room, she peered around. On the far side of a small potted Monstera plant, she saw a large cardboard box. She crouched down and made her way over to it. After another check to make sure Dad hadn’t noticed her, she very quietly opened the lid.

“Found it!” she whispered before she could stop herself. Inside the

box was a variety of smaller boxes, and on top of those were two pairs of white gloves, a feather duster, and a pamphlet explaining how to repack the dolls. The gloves were to keep sweat and oil off them. She gave the pamphlet a quick read through before slipping it into the chest pocket of her sailor uniform.

Then she crept back down to the dining room and peeked over the table.

Dad still seemed completely oblivious to her presence.

“Hmm...,” he murmured.

She put her head down, pulled on the white gloves, and carefully—ever so carefully—reached out for the raised platter set in front of the dolls.

Suddenly, Dad looked up. “Huh?”

Mirai started at the movement.

“!”

She snatched back her gloved hands.

“??” Her nearsighted father thought he’d glimpsed a pair of white gloves mysteriously appearing and disappearing. He blinked hard twice, then rubbed his eyes behind his glasses. Slowly, he tilted his head to check whether anything was under the table.

Mirai squeezed her eyes shut and held her breath.

Dad continued to bend sideways even more slowly. He glanced down.

“Huh?”

The baby Mirai was missing.

“Where did she go?”

Only her blanket remained in the bouncer.

He leaped up in surprise. This was no time to be working! The blood drained from his face as he began scouring the room.

“Mirai, where are you?”

While this was going on, Mirai of the future scuttled frantically out from under the table toward the courtyard. The flooring creaked noisily, but she had no time to worry about that. A second later, Dad crouched down and crawled under the table.

“Mirai, where’d you go?”

Mirai dove from the open door into the tropical garden. At almost the same moment, Dad stood up and examined the bouncer one more time.

“Huh?”

The baby Mirai was fast asleep underneath her blanket, although a bit lower than before.

“...Oh. Guess you just slipped down.”

He sighed with relief, wrapping his arms around her gently so as not to wake her, and readjusted her in the bouncer.

What in the world had just happened?

Kun blinked in confusion.

Just then...

"Did you see that?"

The human version of Yukko had appeared by his side. He was looking through a pair of finger-binoculars.

"The baby disappeared and then reappeared. Weird, isn't it? What do you think could have happened? What I think is, Mirai of the future and Mirai the baby can't exist at the same time."

"Exist?"

Mirai, who had been lying with arms and legs outstretched on the grass, heaved herself up and put her shoes back on.

"You're one to talk about weird existences. Don't you think you're the weird one here? I mean, you're speaking in human language."

"Now that you mention it, I don't," Yukko replied, as if human speech were completely normal for him. Mirai gave an annoyed sigh, then walked over to him.

"Anyway, that's not the issue right now. We need to focus on getting those dolls packed. You don't have time to wonder about the weirdness of things, Yukko."

"Me?"

"Yes, you. We need your help."

Mirai produced the pamphlet from her breast pocket.

"Ah yes." Yukko took it from her and leafed through it.

Mirai looked at Kun—

"You distract Dad."

—but the boy was blushing shyly.

"...What?"

"Do that thing."

"What thing?"

"Do it again."

"Do what?"

Kun didn't answer. He just looked up at her and wiggled bashfully.

Dad stood up, walked over to a bookshelf against the wall, and withdrew an architecture book.

"Hee-hee-hee-hee-hee!"

He could hear Kun laughing in the courtyard. He glanced outside, but Kun was nowhere to be found. He must have been on the far side of the oak tree.

"Hee-hee-hee-hee-hee!"

There was his laugh again. Dad couldn't help smiling at how happy his son sounded.

“Heh-heh... Wonder what’s so much fun out there,” he mumbled to himself, flipping the pages of his book.

MIRAI OF THE FUTURE

One by one, Kun, Mirai, and Yukko poked their heads out from the tropical garden, then crouched down so they wouldn't be seen and sneaked toward the stairs. Careful not to make a sound, they infiltrated the dining room. Just like they had agreed, Kun approached Dad, who was immersed in a book with his back toward them, while Mirai headed for the dolls. Yukko rested his elbows on the table and pulled on the white gloves, then followed Mirai.

"Hmm, I see," Dad murmured, still facing the bookshelf. Kun stood next to him.

"Daddy?"

"What?"

"Um, I..."

"What? What's wrong? Why are you squirming like that?"

If Kun could get Dad to talk to him, it would distract him from the dolls and give Mirai and Yukko time to put them away.

Mirai slid on the other pair of white gloves and stood next to the dolls. Yukko edged over to the cabinet with his back to the wall like a secret agent, pulled a children's chair toward himself, and spread the instructional pamphlet out on the seat. All his motions were brisk and efficient. As Mirai took down the little raised tray and platter, she glanced up at the dolls.

"They're so pretty," she whispered, enthralled by their beauty. She quickly came to her senses, however, and crept up the stairs to the living room. The essential objective of this mission was to pack the dolls into the cardboard boxes.

Meanwhile, Yukko moved aside the orange flowers to the left of the female doll and carefully lifted up the male doll with both hands.

Kun was still fidgeting indecisively.

"Um..."

"Oh, do you have to go?" Dad took a guess.

Kun glanced toward Mirai and shook his head. "It's not that..."

"Are you sure?"

"Uh-huh."

"I bet you do."

"No I don't."

"Just tell me if you have to."

Dad seemed particularly concerned about whether or not he had to use the bathroom.

Meanwhile, Yukko was intently comparing the diagram in the packing instructions with the actual male doll in his hand. According to the photograph in the book, the taillike decoration attached to the top of the man's hat was removable. Yukko pinched it between his thumb and forefinger and twisted it back and forth.

"Just take this off, and...there we go."

It popped right off.

He rested the tail on top of the photograph. Next, he looked for the part the pamphlet had labeled "scepter." Aha, there it was! It was the thing in the doll's right hand that looked like a board.

"Here we go."

He pinched the flat wooden scepter, twisted, and popped it out of the doll's hand.

As Mirai returned after putting away the raised platters in the cardboard box, she noticed Yukko and did a double take.

"Yukko, why are you taking everything apart over here?"

She wanted to loudly berate him, but obviously, she couldn't. Instead, she waved both hands at him.

"Hmm? What?" Yukko fretted, looking back and forth between the male doll and Mirai. "I'm sorry! Oh dear..."

Flustered, he picked up the tail and pushed it back onto the doll's hat. Mirai rushed over to him, opened her mouth wide, and hissed, "You don't have to put it back on!"

"Ack..." Yukko shrank at the scolding. His timidity was typical of a pet dog.

Sensing the fuss going on behind his back, Dad paused.

"Hmm?"

Mirai and Yukko noticed his reaction in turn.

This emergency called for an immediate retreat. Panicked, Yukko started putting everything back where it had been, sweeping the pamphlet off the chair. The scepter was still there, but Yukko ignored it and returned the male doll to its original spot on the cabinet. As he did, though, his hand brushed a miniature paper lantern in the display.

Dad slowly turned toward the cabinet.

"Huh...?"

No one there. Everything looked the same as always, but for some reason, the paper lantern had tipped off balance and was rocking back and forth. It tumbled to the floor with a clatter.

"..."

Dad stared at it for a moment, then set his book down on the table and walked over to the cabinet. He picked up the lantern, put it back

where it belonged, and sank into the children's chair.

"Now, why would it fall over...?" Befuddled, he studied the lantern. No one else should have been there. Of course, he didn't notice Mirai and Yukko desperately trying to squeeze under the table directly behind him.

Mirai stifled her breathing as best she could. She was so close to Dad that the slightest noise would likely alert him to her presence. Breaking out in a nervous sweat, she whispered to Yukko.

"He's gonna notice us... Yukko, stop breathing..."

"What?!" Yukko raised his eyebrows at her unreasonable demand.

Dad gazed up at the ceiling as if lost in thought.

"Hmm. What could've caused it...?"

He looked to the right, still unable to come up with an answer.

"Huh?"

Then he looked down.

"What?"

The pamphlet was on the floor.

"What's this?"

Shoot! Mirai's panic took over, and she suddenly reached forward. The pamphlet disappeared from her father's view.

"Hey!" he yelped. "What is going on here...?"

Slowly, he stood up and peered between his legs.

Under the table, Mirai had squeezed her eyes shut, but she cracked them open a tiny bit and looked to the side. Yukko was dripping nervous sweat and grimacing. Mirai closed her eyes again and tried to think of a way out, but nothing came to her.

She checked beside her again, and Yukko's face was turning maroon from holding his breath. She closed her eyes even tighter.

Slowly, Dad started lowering his head.

"...!"

At that very instant, Mirai heard a voice.

"I gotta go!"

"Huh?"

Dad looked up in surprise and found Kun, hands on his thighs, wriggling back and forth.

"I gotta go right now!"

Dad was upright in a flash.

"Wait a second!"

"I can't wait."

"Wait, wait, wait, wait!"

Forgetting everything else, Dad grabbed Kun in his arms, dashed up the stairs, and tore through the bedroom to the bathroom. Yukko made sure he wouldn't be seen, then crawled out from under the table, panting heavily.

"Ahh, I thought I was going to die!"

"Phew. Now's our chance."

The pair dived on the doll display.

With surprising speed, they transferred the golden folding screen, lanterns, little vase of cherry blossoms, and other components of the display into the cardboard box. Despite their urgency, they were as careful as possible, painstakingly brushing the dust off each item before wrapping it in paper. Finally, Mirai lovingly placed the girl doll inside the box. The only thing left to do was for Yukko to place the boy doll he was holding alongside her.

Just then, Mirai heard the sound of the toilet flushing, followed by an exchange between Dad and Kun.

"Can you dry your hands by yourself?"

"Uh-huh."

"Okay."

Mirai shut the top of the cardboard box, crouched down behind it, and covered her face with the feather duster. Yukko, still holding the male doll, spun around in search of a place to hide. Without a moment to spare, he flopped down on the floor under the low table in the living room.

Dad walked down from the bathroom and passed right by their respective hiding spots, but he didn't notice them. He then continued down the stairs to the dining room and walked over to the bookshelf. A few minutes later, Kun came down the stairs into the living room.

"Didja do it?" he asked, hiking up his pants.

But...

Mirai spotted the boy doll in Yukko's hand.

"Oh no!" she whisper-screamed, her mouth agape.

"What?"

"The scepter's missing!"

She was right. The doll's right hand was empty.

"What's a scepter?"

"That thing it was holding that looks like a board," Yukko said, searching frantically.

Mirai pressed her hands to her pale cheeks. Where could it have gone? It would be nearly impossible to find such a tiny thing at this point.

"What do we do? If the scepter isn't in the box, it won't count as being all put away," she said.

"Um, is that it?" Kun asked.

"What?"

Kun pointed toward the dining room.

"Oh! That's it!" Mirai whisper-shouted.

The scepter was stuck to Dad's rear end as he stood in front of the

bookshelf. It was dangling loosely, just barely hooked on his pants by a splinter.

Dad was facing away from them, reading a book.

Kun, Mirai, and Yukko poked their faces out from the far side of the dining table. They could see the scepter on his butt.

The three of them quietly inched forward.

Dad turned the page in his book.

They stopped. They held their breath. They slowly started forward again. Stealthily, still without breathing, they tiptoed in unison toward their tiny target.

Suddenly, Dad spun around toward his laptop.

“?!”

Instantly, Kun, Mirai, and Yukko froze, each with one foot in midair, quaking with nerves.

But Dad was so absorbed in his work that he didn’t seem to see them. He finished whatever he was doing on the laptop, then turned nonchalantly back to the shelf and returned the book to its place.

Kun, Mirai, and Yukko stood stock-still, balancing on one foot for a moment.

“...Pheeew.”

They exhaled deeply and slowly began advancing again.

Dad grabbed another book and flipped through it.

The trio took a very careful step toward the dangling scepter.

Without warning, Dad innocently scratched his rear end.

“!”

They froze again.

Scratching accomplished, his hand gravitated back to the book.

They watched for a moment, each with one foot raised.

“...Pheeew.” After another breath, they moved forward.

The scepter swayed back and forth.

Trepidatiously, covered in nervous sweat, Yukko reached toward it.

“...!”

Back and forth.

Kun stood on his tiptoes and did the same.

“...!”

Back and forth.

Mirai extended her sweaty hand, too.

“...!”

They were on the verge of making contact with Dad’s butt, when

—the scepter suddenly stopped swaying. The next instant, it plummeted to the ground.

“...Huh?”

Sensing something, Dad looked up from his book and glanced over his shoulder.

“Hmm?”

No one there.

Not a soul.

He scratched his head. He must’ve been imagining things. He slid the book he’d been reading back onto the shelf.

The scepter was safely back in Mirai’s hand.

The splinter from when Dad sat on it wasn’t as noticeable as she’d feared. Nevertheless, the little board had been damaged, and she murmured an apology to the pair of dolls tucked facing each other in the box. She slipped off the white gloves and replaced them, too. “I’ll see you next year,” she whispered as she gently shut the top of the container. “And thanks, Big Brother.” She smiled with a sense of accomplishment.

She was standing under a fantastical tunnel formed from hundreds of jade-vine flowers. She was lovelier than ever amid the jewellike turquoise blooms.

“I’ve heard that when two people do something together, sometimes they feel more like friends and get along better. What do you think? Do you like me a little more now?”

“Um...”

Kun tilted his head and thought for a minute, then shook his head furiously back and forth.

“Nuh-uh. Nope.”

“Hmph.” Mirai sighed, smiling bitterly. “Well, never mind, then.”

She turned her back on him, her face unreadable, and walked off without so much as a backward glance at the jade-green tunnel. Kun thought that since she was Mirai of the future, once she went out the other side, she would return to the future. But it turned out to be just an ordinary tunnel made of flowers.

The sky was already almost dark.

The courtyard was normal again, and Mom called out as she returned from her business trip.

“I’m home!”

“Welcome back!”

“I’m exhausted,” she huffed, climbing the stairs to the living room and taking Mirai in her arms, still dressed in her suit. She sighed. “I’ll feed you in a minute, Mirai.”

Seeing the cardboard box next to the sofa, she smiled at Dad.

“Thanks for putting the dolls away!”

He was just heading up the stairs. "Oh no, I forgot!" he exclaimed, running back down toward the living room as if just remembering his chore. A minute later, he returned, pointing behind him in confusion.

"Did you put them away after you got home?"

"Are you trying to make a joke? You aren't very funny."

Kun looked up from his toy bulldozer. "I put them away."

"Huh?"

"Me and Mirai."

"Mirai?"

Dad threw a bewildered glance toward Mirai as she nursed.

"And Yukko."

"Yukko?"

Under the low table, the dog version of Yukko yawned.

That evening, they ate the sushi Mom had bought on her business trip. It was topped with thick, delicious slices of raw fish. They couldn't stop commenting on how tasty it was, and before they knew it, the plate was empty. After dinner, Mom made what Kun had requested for dessert: pancakes with strawberries and honey.

In her bouncer, Mirai waved her stuffed bee in the air.

"Oh, I forgot to tell you. I met Mirai of the future."

"Really? What did you do together?" Dad inquired, holding a mug in one hand.

"The bee game."

"Bees?"

"And Red Light, Green Light."

"That sounds fun. I'd like to meet the grown-up Mirai, too. Wouldn't you, Yumi?" he asked, watching Mirai lovingly.

Mom thought for a moment as she cut the pancake on her plate into little pieces.

"Maybe...but I think I'd rather wait. Right now, I prefer the baby Mirai." She raised her head and looked at her daughter.

"I like baby Mirai better, too."

Everyone laughed.

Mirai solemnly observed Mom's and Dad's smiling faces, then Kun's.

"Gaaaah," she said with a sigh.

The courtyard was drenched in the June rains.

On the oak leaves, each and every drop of water reflected its own tiny little world.

Mom was sprawled on the bed showing him the pictures in her laptop's photo library. It was a holiday, and she and Kun had decided earlier to spend it together relaxing. She picked a picture and quizzed him on it.

"Who's this?"

"Um...it's Mommy!"

"That's right!"

Unlike the woman next to Kun now, the Mom on the screen was wearing glasses and had her hair in a bun.

"Where am I?" Kun asked.

"In my belly. You were born after this."

In the photo, she had turned to the side and pulled up her shirt to show her swollen belly. It was October. She scrolled backward through the library from August to July to June. In each picture Dad had taken to record her progress, her stomach grew smaller.

"What was I like when I was born?"

"You were like Mirai is now."

"I hate Mirai."

"Don't say that," Mom said, frowning tiredly.

They looked at pictures taken right after she married Dad. In one, she had a bunch of violets in her hand, standing in an alley on the Île de la Cité in Paris, where she had gone for an interview. In another, she was striking a silly pose in the kitchen of the old house, a frying pan in her right hand and a wok in her left. And in another, she was sitting on the floor of Dad's room, eating take-out after coming home late from work.

All of a sudden, they were looking at a picture of her in a sparkling white wedding dress.

"Oh! And who is this?"

"Mommy!"

She was in front of a glass wedding chapel with a green garden, smiling in her makeup. She could have been a princess in a picture book.

"You're pretty."

"Sure am!"

"And skinny."

"Shush!" She snapped the laptop shut and pulled an old-fashioned photo album toward her. "The older ones are in here."

When she opened it, the scent of old paper mixed with the sour smell of the glue on the backs of the pictures.

"This is when I met Daddy."

In the picture, she and a writer were interviewing him at a chain coffee shop.

"This is when I first started working."

She was standing in the editing department leaning over an open magazine, a strained smile on her face.

Next to that was a picture of her dressed in traditional pleated *hakama* trousers holding a bouquet of flowers with her university diploma tucked under her arm. Beside each photo, a small piece of paper showed the date and gave a short explanation. As they flipped through the album, Mom got younger and younger.

Starting on the next page, the images showed her in the countryside where she'd grown up. In one, she was wearing her highschool uniform for the first time, eyes averted in embarrassment because she had been overly self-conscious back then. In another, she was grinning cheerfully with her friends in the junior high drama club, though in truth, she had been unhappy because she had often been a target for bullies. She had pictures of good times with her family when they went skiing or visited the dinosaur park or took a trip to the amusement park in Tokyo. In one, she was wearing a backpack and standing awkwardly still in front of a wooden school building, nervous about her first day of school.

"Oh, look, there's Yoichi."

"Yoichi?"

"My little brother. Remember we went to his wedding last year?"

The pair of siblings was standing next to each other in the front yard of the country house. Mom was wearing a dress and looked a little older than Kun was now. Next to her, Yoichi gripped the handlebars of a bicycle with training wheels.

"You weren't friends?"

"Of course we were! We were only a year apart, so everyone used to say we looked like twins."

"There's a cat."

"Oh, that's a stuffed animal. Your great-grandmother gave it to me for my birthday."

"I want a present, too."

"What? Why?"

“Um...because it’s my birthday.”

“Your birthday isn’t for months.”

Mom slammed the album shut as if to end the conversation.

“I want a bike.”

“Why are you asking for presents when it’s not your birthday?”

She escaped off the bed to pick up Mirai, now six months old. She marched down the stairs, silently grumbling about how Kun could answer anything she said with a request to buy something these days.

“Sheesh...” Toy trains littered the living room floor, leaving nowhere for her to step. “It’s always so messy in here.”

She looked around in dismay as she stepped over the rails and walked down to the dining room, worrying about what she might find there. As she suspected, half-assembled tracks were under the table.

“Argh, and I just cleaned up, too...” Slightly dizzy, she went back to the living room.

Kun ambushed her with his E353 train. “I want my bike this color.”

“Your granny’s coming, so you need to clean up,” she said, putting Mirai in the bouncer and glaring at Kun. He kept mumbling about colors and pointing at the purple train. Mom raised her voice in warning. “Kun...”

“I’ll clean up with Daddy.”

“Daddy’s working today. He’s not here.”

“Then I can’t.”

Mom put her hands on her hips as if to ask why not. “Little boys who don’t clean up have all their toys thrown away.”

“...I don’t wanna!” Kun refused, shaking his head stubbornly.

Argh. She wouldn’t have bought them in the first place if he wasn’t going to take care of them.

“Then I’m not getting you any more.”

“Nooo!” He shook his head in frustration and jumped up and down on the floor.

“Well, then clean up.”

“NOOOOOOOO!!!”

He flung himself to the ground as if he could no longer stand under the weight of such a hopeless situation, wailing and wagging his butt in anguish.

Now I’ve done it, Mom thought, silently regretting her words. *I went too far.* She closed her eyes, a pained expression on her face. *I lost my temper again...*

How often did she find herself regretting her actions like this? She wanted to always be calm and gentle, but most of the time, reality wasn’t so kind. Even though she wanted to be a good mother, she hardly ever succeeded.

Suddenly, Kun sprang up.

"I hate Mirai!" he shouted, raising his toy train high to whack her with it. Guessing what he was up to, though, Mom swiftly scooped her up.

"Don't hit her! You said you'd be her friend!"

The doorbell rang.

"Shoot, Granny's already here!"

Mom dashed down the stairs, leaving Kun in the living room. Yukko was there with him, barking excitedly. Mom slipped on her sandals, walked through the courtyard where the rain was just clearing, and stopped in the playroom to lay Mirai gently in her bassinet.

"Wait here for just a minute. I'll be right back."

The bell rang again impatiently.

"Okay, okay, I'm coming."

She jogged down to the front door.

After Mom left the room, Kun kept fuming, his cheeks puffed up and lips in a pout.

Mommy's mean.

If she threw away his toys, how was he supposed to play? Kids had to play. How could she say she wouldn't buy him any more toys, like some kind of monster?

The more he thought about it, the more his anger boiled.

"...Grrr!"

He tried yelling, but it wasn't enough. What could he do? He looked around and spotted a box full of train tracks on the sofa. Perfect! He upended it with both hands, kicking the contents around the room, then threw the box aside when he spied the other side of the table. A box of toys sat atop the low table. With all his strength, he smacked it to the floor and proceeded to hoist it in the air, shaking out everything inside.

"Grrrrr!"

After tossing the box away, he squatted among his toys and yanked out a drawing pad. He grabbed a crayon and scribbled on the white page, venting his rage. He leaned farther and farther forward to get out all his feelings. When he was finished, he pummeled the page with the crayon as if punctuating a sentence with a period.

It was a picture of his mother with horns sticking out of her head. She was a witch.

"Mommy's a wicked witch!" he said.

But he was still mad.

"I hate Mommy."

He stomped across the room and yanked the door open as hard as he could, dislodging the raindrops stuck to the glass. He marched down the stairs into the courtyard, where the rain had stopped. When he got there, he heard a fizzing sound, like water churning.

“...Hmm?”

Just then, he felt a cool breeze on his skin. He stopped and looked toward the sound, and what he saw beyond the oak tree took his breath away.

A lush green meadow as vast as the great plains of Asia stretched to the horizon. Several giant, table-like stone mountains towered over him, their rough cliff faces exposed. It was a perfect wilderness, unblemished by a single unnecessary thing. Still, something felt off about this magnificent landscape. Gazing up at the sky, Kun searched for the root of this peculiar unease.

Above him, enormous ripples were spreading very, very slowly across the sky.

“...”

Why were there ripples in the sky? Kun’s eyes went wide. The grass at his feet was waving in time with the sky. *I’m in a weird place again...*

Just then—

“It’s not true that you hate me, is it?”

—he heard a voice.

It was definitely familiar.

“Mirai of the future?”

She was standing next to the oak tree, but this time she wore yellow rubber boots that stopped just below her knees and a fluorescent lime-green raincoat. It was shaped like a poncho, with sleeves so long they hid her hands. It was cute on her. It was very “Mirai,” in Kun’s opinion.

“My big brother tried to hit me with the bullet train again, didn’t he?”

She seemed somewhat miffed. That was just like her, too. Kun shook his head.

“It wasn’t a bullet train.”

“Bullet trains aren’t for hitting people with.”

“It was a Super Azusa.”

“It doesn’t matter which it was.”

Mirai frowned and shook her long sleeves, then sighed her usual sigh. Before Kun even noticed, a school of red and blue tropical fish had floated down next to where they were standing on either side of the oak tree. The fish were silent, like decorations on a mobile.

“Why aren’t you nicer to Mom?”

“I can’t.”

“Don’t you feel bad for being mean and upsetting her on her day off? She hardly has any, you know.”

“...”

Kun wanted to say he wasn’t being mean but couldn’t. Instead, he just stared down silently. The reason he couldn’t be nice to her was because she didn’t love him. Why wouldn’t she love him like he wanted? Why? Why? Why?

“...Well?”

“...I’m not cute.”

“What?”

“...You and Yukko are cute...but I’m not...”

The sadness swelled bigger and bigger inside Kun. Tears started rolling down his cheeks. He wiped them away with his palms, but no matter what he did, more and more kept coming.

Mirai stood stiffly, as if having done something she hadn’t intended.

“Um, uh, ah...”

She wasn’t sure what to say, but she rushed over to him in a flustered attempt to patch things up.

“Th-th-that’s not true. You are cute!”

Sniffing, Kun turned his back on her.

“No I’m not.”

“Yes you are. So—”

“Waaaaah!”

He shook off Mirai’s hand and abruptly ran away.

“Wait, Big Brother!”

The startled school of tropical fish changed direction all at once and swam toward Mirai.

“Eek!” she cried, covering her face with the sleeve of her raincoat.

“Hey! Big Brother?”

He didn’t turn around.

“Waaaaaaaah!”

Kun, too, was pushing his way through the ever-expanding school of exotic fish, but he was so sad, he didn’t even notice his bizarre predicament. The fish formed a tunnel as if to lead him somewhere. They swam in a spiral, which became part of a bigger spiral, which belonged to an even bigger spiral, and on and on. This self-replicating helix seemed to extend forever.

When Kun finally reached the destination to which the fish were leading him, he saw a ray of light. This blinding brightness drew closer and closer. Was it the exit? Was it the end of the spiral? Without warning, he saw foam in front of his eyes, like he’d reached the surface of the sea. And then he burst through...

Kun's momentum carried him forward in a headlong slide. He landed in a shallow puddle in an alleyway, generating a giant splash and a burst of ripples in the water. Groaning, he hefted himself up off his face and plopped down on his behind, shaking his wet head in a watery spray that made even more ripples.

"Wh-what's going on?"

He stared around in a daze.

The rain had just lifted over the totally unfamiliar alleyway. The street was only wide enough for two cars and lined with small shops with signs advertising alcohol, cigarettes, clothes, salt, and the like. Some of the headlights on the parked cars were round; others were square. There was a vending machine selling drinks Kun had never seen before. Oddly, a sign reading PHOTO PRINTS 20 YEN hung outside a drugstore, not a camera shop.

He definitely wasn't in the present, but this wasn't the distant past, either. The dark shadows under the eaves contrasted with the brilliant white sky reflected on the wet asphalt, capturing the in-between feeling of the era in which he had landed.

"...Where am I?" Kun asked no one in particular as he got to his feet. As if in answer, a drop of water splashed down a little ways away. He turned toward the sound.

"...?"

There was a row of old wooden houses with tiled roofs and an old-fashioned barbershop with potted plants lined up outside. A red umbrella was leaning against an electrical pole. Beyond the pole, a girl with long hair crouched on the asphalt, her hunched back to Kun.

"*Sniff...sniff...*"

She must have been crying—she was rubbing her eyes with the backs of her hands, and her shoulders were shaking as if she was all alone in the world.

"...*Sniff...sniff...*"

She looked a little older than Kun, perhaps in her first year of elementary school. He quietly crept up to her and peered into her face.

"What are you sad about?"

She didn't answer.

“...Sniff...”

Kun thought for a moment, then put the palm of his hand on her head and stroked it like a mother soothing her child.

“Don’t cry.”

The girl took her hands away from her face and slowly looked up at Kun tearily.

“...Thank you. You’re sweet.”

“Oh!”

Her face was the spitting image of Mom’s in her childhood photos in the album. The girl blinked and smiled.

“But I wasn’t really crying, you know,” she said, pointing with her pencil to a scrap of paper on her knee. Something had been written there in an unsteady hand. “Since I’m writing a letter, I thought it would be a good idea to put my feelings into it.” She giggled, shrugged, and stuck out her tongue.

Kun was surprised. Had she been fake crying? He felt like he’d been tricked.

The little girl dragged the red umbrella behind her as she strolled down the wet street.

She wore an apparently handmade violet dress with a round collar.

Kun trailed behind her, staring at her white rain boots. Wet pine needles were stuck to them. He was wondering absently how long they’d been there when the girl stopped in front of the gate to a large house. The nameplate on the gate read IKEDA CLINIC.

When the girl read it aloud, Kun thought it sounded familiar. A magnificent, neatly trimmed pine tree stood in the front garden. The building was made up of a traditional Japanese-style main house attached to a clinic that blended Western and Japanese styles. According to the girl, that part had been “rebuilt” in the 1920s.

They stepped through the fancy glass door and peered around the entryway. Both the pathway outside and the atrium itself were paved with imported tiles. Inside, the distinctive smell of hospital disinfectant permeated the building. The words RECEPTION and DISPENSARY were etched onto the polished glass of the old-fashioned reception window, but no one seemed to be behind the counter. Perhaps the clinic was closed for the afternoon.

In one corner of the entryway, a pair of fancy women’s leather shoes sat neatly next to each other. The girl stared at them pensively.

“...”

She took the scrap of paper out of her pocket, glanced over the writing on it, quickly folded it up, and slipped it into one of the shoes.

The girl dragged her red umbrella past a large miso factory.

“What did you write?” Kun asked the back of her head.

She didn’t turn around. “Dear Grandma, I want a pet cat. Please let me have one.”

“A cat?”

“Animals like me. I can make friends with any animal right away. But Grandma’s allergic, so she doesn’t let me have pets. She says if I have one, it has to live outside. But no one keeps a cat outside, right? So I’m gonna keep writing her letters until she agrees, even if I have to write dozens and dozens. I’m not gonna stop until she gives in.”

Her determination amazed Kun. She seemed to be talking to herself more than him, and he couldn’t get a word in edgewise.

They were walking along a street that used to be an old highway. It was lined with wide, old-fashioned houses with wooden latticework, ivy-covered clay storehouses, sake breweries with round balls of cedar branches hanging outside to tell customers about the newest batch, and other old shops. In a shed behind one of these, they discovered a rain-drenched kitten hunched between piles of wooden pallets. It glanced at them but then quickly looked away with a warning growl.

The little girl handed her umbrella to Kun, crouched down, and reached out to it.

“Good kitty. Come over here. Don’t be scared.”

She gestured with her finger for the kitten to come closer. The growl got louder...

“Don’t be scared. Let’s be friends.”

The hissing grew even fiercer. Kun had to admire the nerve of this girl, who had no reservations about extending her hand toward a creature threatening her. Things really were different when animals liked you...

Just as that thought crossed his mind, however, the cat screeched and swiped at the girl with its claws. She pulled her hand back with a cry, and the two watched in silence as it ran off.

“...”

The girl lingered in front of the pile of pallets. Kun didn’t know what to say, so he kept his mouth shut. After a moment, she stood up shakily and changed the subject as if nothing had happened.

“...Do you have any brothers or sisters?”

In the playground, scattered puddles reflected the trees as they passed. The girl left the road and started splashing through them, calling it a shortcut. Kun followed, then answered her question in the affirmative.

“Brother or sister?”

“Little sister.”

“I have a little brother. He’s a weakling and worse at school than

me, so he's always crying. That's why my mom likes me more. I know she'll let me have a cat even if Grandma says no. Boy, am I glad my brother is a crybaby."

As Kun listened to the back of her head, she suddenly stopped and turned around.

"Here we are."

"...?"

Instead of asking where "here" was, Kun lifted his eyes to a swallow's nest. A whole brood of chicks huddled together inside.

The little girl stood on tiptoe, put the key in the lock, and opened the glass front door. She tugged off her rubber boots, tossed them aside carelessly, and marched briskly into the house. Kun wondered if it was okay for him to go inside. He poked his face into the foyer and scanned the interior. There was a nice carpet, a number of bookshelves, and some potted plants on the floor. Everything was very tidy. He caught sight of a little fish tank near the front door and yelped before he could stop himself.

"Oh!"

The tank's layout was simple, with just one type of water grass and one kind of stone, exactly like the wide meadow with the tall mountains he'd seen just a little while ago. He'd been inside it, gazing at the mountains above as the wind blew past. All of it fit inside this little aquarium no bigger than his outstretched hands. As he gazed absently at a tropical fish floating in the water, he wondered what it all meant.

Abruptly, a loud scraping sound brought him back to earth.

The sliding paper doors to a room facing the veranda had been pulled open. He took a peek inside and found toys scattered all over the straw mats on the floor.

"Wow..."

"You can play with my brother's toys if you want." The girl deposited a box of them on a low table, then brought over another from an alcove in the room and dumped it noisily in front of Kun. LEGOs, toy cars, building blocks, and dolls spilled out—more than he could possibly play with. She seemed to be giving him the royal treatment. Still, he was worried about how hard it would be to clean up so much.

"Won't we get in trouble?"

She shrugged. "Making a mess is more fun."

She grinned boldly, calling to mind the phrase *wild child*.

Kun tipped his head back slowly, turning the words over in his mind. *Making a mess is more fun...more fun...more fun...*

"...You're right!" he declared solemnly. He couldn't argue with

that.

The girl smiled as she stood in front of the alcove and its painted scroll depicting the word *idleness*.

“Are you hungry?” she asked, leaving the room.

Kun followed her into the kitchen. There was a gas stove, a gas rice cooker, and a gas toaster. For some reason, everything used gas. In the middle stood a round dining table supported by a single leg, with a newspaper spread on top. The headline read, “President Gorbachev to Reunite East and West Germany.”

Kun heard something fall and raised his head. The girl was standing on a chair and dumping a box of snacks all over the table. When she was done, she chucked the box aside, picked up a Bourbon White Lolita cookie, and unwrapped it.

“You can have some, too.”

“Won’t we get in trouble?” Kun worried. But the girl just paused with the cookie halfway to her mouth and smiled a naughty smile.

“But they taste better when you’re messy.”

Kun gaped at her. She was noisily scarfing down her cookie. What a bold claim. Was she right? He followed her lead and reached for one of the cookies. He opened the package and nibbled on it with his front teeth. *Crunch*. He took another bite. *Crunch, crunch*. He tested out the flavor farther back in his mouth. *Crunch, crunch, crunch*. Then he looked up with utmost seriousness.

“It’s yummy.”

It tasted nothing like the snacks he ate politely.

The girl stood up on her chair as if to say he had hit the nail on the head.

“Right?”

Kun grabbed the edge of the table.

“Yummy!”

“Yummy!!”

“YUMMY!!!”

“Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

They were shouting together and leaning on the edge of the round table in turn so that it rocked like a seesaw. Cookies scattered onto the floor. The girl gave a strange, shrill shriek, hopped down from the chair, and scampered around the kitchen like a monkey.

“Hoo-hoo-hoo-hoo!”

Kun ran around with her, laughing. They sped down a narrow hallway lined with cans and bottles and slammed into the half-open door to the washroom.

“How about this?” the girl asked, flinging paperbacks off the bookshelf, and Kun copied her. One after the next, they pulled out books and lobbed them every which way onto the floor.

“This is fun! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

Next, the girl called, “What about this?” and went into the garden to jump at the laundry hanging out to dry.

“Oof!”

She caught hold of a shirt and yanked as hard as she could. The clothespin flew off with a snap.

“Oof!”

Kun did the same. A pair of underwear fell to the ground on its hanger. They jumped again and again, and laundry fluttered down all around their feet.

“Ha-ha-ha-ha!”

They were having so much fun they couldn’t stop.

“Hee-hee-hee-hee!”

Kun cackled in a silly voice, too.

“Eh-hee-hee-hee!”

They tore around, cackling like a pair of lunatics and doing whatever they wanted. They kicked over the plants in the atrium, pulled out the drawers of the paulownia-wood dresser, and left the refrigerator door open.

Next to the television in the living room lay a pile of videotapes. It was the first time Kun had seen the long, narrow boxes. Each had a neatly labeled sticker on its side.

Kun wondered what they were and what they were for. Now that he thought about it, the television was shaped funny, too. It was a square box and much deeper than normal TVs. He wondered if there was something inside. He looked to the side and saw that the girl was howling with laughter after knocking over the mountain of tapes.

“Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

Kun did the same, laughing so hard he almost cried. They both stood on the low table and laughed until it hurt.

“Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

At that very moment, they heard a key turning in the lock, and they looked toward it in surprise. On the far side of the glass, someone was about to open the front door.

“It’s my mom...”

The girl pressed her hands to her pale cheeks. The videotape she was holding clattered to the table. Now that they had calmed down, they could see that the living room was a disaster, as if a storm had swept through.

“What should we do? She’s gonna be mad.”

The girl took Kun’s hand and pulled him into the kitchen. She opened the back door and pushed him outside along with his shoes.

“You should go home.”

“Oh!”

Before Kun could say anything else, the door shut with a bang.

The sky was dark with storm clouds. A drop or two of rain plopped into a puddle on the asphalt, creating ripples on the water. The weeds by the side of the road swayed restlessly.

Kun watched the aluminum door, puzzled, and strained his ears to hear inside.

"I can't believe this! What am I going to do about this horrible mess?!"

He shrank back at the sudden, angry shout from the house. It was the girl's mother. Soon after, he heard the sound of the girl crying.

"Waaaaah!"

"I've had it up to here with this! I'm going to throw away all your toys!"

She was yelling so loudly the glass on the door shuddered.

"Waaaaah! Mommy, I'm sorry!"

It was raining so hard the puddles sprayed as each drop hit them, and the weeds were swishing madly.

"I'm never going to buy you sweets again!"

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry, Mommy!"

Kun was suddenly afraid. He felt as if everything he had built up was crashing down all at once. Unable to listen to the girl's desperate pleading anymore, he pressed his hands over his ears and fled into the downpour.

The trees outside the elementary school were dancing in the wind. Kun tripped and fell in the drenched playground with an enormous splash. "Oww," he moaned. His sopping-wet clothes were heavy as he shakily got to his feet, gathered all his willpower, and took off again. He wanted to escape this nightmare as quickly as he could.

After Kun disappeared, the rain beat down even harder. The heavens seemed to be trying to flood the entire world, leaving nowhere left to flee.

Before he knew it, Kun was sleeping on his bed in the dim bedroom. As Mom gazed lovingly at his sleeping face, Granny called up from downstairs.

"Is he going to eat dinner?"

"No, he won't wake up."

Sometimes, when Kun was very tired from playing a lot in the afternoon, he fell asleep early in the evening. On those days, Mom didn't try to wake him; usually, he slept soundly until morning. Just now, she had come to check on him, but he showed no signs of waking up, even when she took off his clothes and put on his pajamas. She wondered what he was dreaming about.

"You're my treasure." Mom kissed his sleeping face and quietly

crept away so as not to disturb him.

"That's what I used to say to you," Granny remarked.

"Now it's what I say."

Granny laughed. For dinner, they ate some food she had bought in the shops near the train station, and afterward, there was a brightly colored gelatin mold for dessert. They set aside slices for Kun and Dad and finished off the rest between the two of them.

Granny held the sleeping Mirai while Mom spooned the dessert into her mouth. It tasted as good as it looked.

"You never did let me have a cat. I was sad about that."

"I'm sorry."

"I was sure you loved me more than Yoichi. I didn't know back then that the needy kids are the ones their parents love the most."

"You needed quite a bit of care yourself. Stubborn and difficult. All I remember is yelling at you."

"I forgot."

"You left your things everywhere."

"Well, you know, I only started cleaning up after I got married."

"Good grief."

They both chuckled.

Mom raised her head with a distant gaze, as if she wanted to express her true feelings aloud for her own benefit.

"I'm trying to do my best raising the kids while I'm working...but when I stop to think about it, all I ever do is get mad. I worry I'm not doing a good job as a mother."

She was always questioning herself. Not a day passed when she didn't ask if she was doing what she should as a mother. She worried about big things, like whether the decision to keep working instead of becoming a stay-at-home mom was the right one, and little things, like her anger earlier today. Every time she had to make a choice, she wanted to stand still and think, but she had to keep moving forward before she could settle on an answer. If there was one thing she could say was absolutely true, though, it was this:

"I just want them to be happy."

"As long as you know that, you'll be fine. Wishing for those things is important when you're raising kids," Granny said, stroking Mirai's hair as she slept.

Mom lowered her head, thinking about that word.

"A wish..."

"...Mm."

In the middle of the night, Kun suddenly woke up.

His exhausted mother was asleep next to Mirai. Kun got up and looked at her groggily. He noticed tears pooled in the hollows under

her eyes.

“...”

Her tears reminded him of the ones the little girl had shed. He wondered if her mother had thrown away all her toys after that. Had she ever bought her daughter sweets again? What about the cat?

Mom didn't answer him. She was fast asleep.

Kun put his hand on her head and stroked it gently with his palm, like he'd done for the little girl.

“It's okay.”

The rainy season ended, and the blue skies of summer arrived.

Kun and Dad piled in the Volvo 240 for a little trip together. They headed toward Naka Ward on National Highway 16 and soon arrived at a large expanse of grass and trees called Negishi Forest Park. They parked in the lot, and Dad took a brand new children's bicycle with training wheels off the roof rack.

Kun put on his helmet right away and straddled the bike, then pushed down hard on the pedals to glide easily over the asphalt. The training wheels rattled noisily.

"Not a bad strategy, putting the letter in your mom's shoes like that. Where'd you get that idea?" Dad asked, walking along next to him. "Maybe I'll try it myself..."

He looked wistfully up at the sky.

"Goo!"

Inside the baby sling, Mirai made a sound like she was calling him. She was already more than seven months old.

"Hi, Mirai. I see you," Dad said, inclining his head so the brim of his hat covered his face as he made a funny expression.

"Peekaboo!"

Mirai didn't smile. She just stared.

According to Mom, Mirai had started smiling a lot when she was around three months old, but she still hadn't given Dad a big grin. Even though he was the one who spent more time taking care of her at home, she only half smiled at him. Then, when Mom came home from work, Mirai's smile was so wide it covered her whole face. Dad pondered why that was. Was it the power of breastfeeding? Since that was beyond him, maybe he had to try extra-hard.

He looked down again and made the most ridiculous face he could.

"Peekaboo!"

Mirai didn't smile. She just studied him like any other oddity.

Dad had been reading up on how to play peekaboo. First, you were supposed to make eye contact and let the baby see what you usually look like. Next, you covered your face for just the right amount of time—not too short and not too long. Then, you made the silliest expression you could. The more outlandish it was, the more the

baby was supposed to laugh.

Dad looked down a third time, jutted his jaw forward as far as he could, and made googly eyes.

“Peekaboo!”

Mirai didn’t smile. She just scrutinized him with deep interest.

Dad slumped over and muttered despondently.

“...You really won’t laugh for me, will you?”

Negishi Forest Park was the former site of the Negishi Racecourse, the first European-style horse racing track in Japan. For a little while after World War II ended, the American army had been in charge of it, but when control was returned to the Japanese, the city converted it into a park. The only remnant of its history was a seven-story grandstand called the First-Class Horse Viewing Stand, built in 1929, although it was falling apart and completely covered in vines.

Next to the grandstand was a small, round plaza. Kun and his father had come here so Kun could ride his new bike. Since he had only ever ridden a tricycle, he needed somewhere flat to learn, and Dad had found this place on the Internet.

On the grass, children shouted happily as they jumped rope or played with balls. Elderly people strolled with their dogs. A middle-aged foreign woman in workout clothes was sitting on a bench reading a magazine. On the neighboring bench, Dad took Mirai out of the baby sling and put her in the stroller.

“...”

Kun straddled his bike but didn’t pedal forward.

Some other children his age were riding around energetically.

Still as a statue, he stared at them.

They didn’t have training wheels on their bikes.

Surprised, Kun looked down at his own ride.

It definitely had training wheels.

He raised his head again.

No training wheels.

He looked down.

Training wheels.

No doubt about it.

“Really? Are you sure you want me to take off the training wheels?”

Dad half stood from the bench in astonishment.

Kun turned toward him with determination burning in his eyes and nodded vigorously.

“Uh-huh.”

“Right now?”

“Uh-huh.”

"You're going to practice riding without them?"

"Uh-huh."

"...You're really, really sure?"

"Uh-huh."

Dad went to the parking lot and returned carrying the toolbox he kept in the car. With the help of his monkey wrench, he took off the six-sided bolts, and the training wheels were gone. He held the back of the bike while Kun gripped the handlebars and lifted one leg, but...

"Oomph...oof...erk..."

...his foot caught on the seat because his legs were so short.

"Oof..."

He finally climbed up. The tips of his toes barely touched the ground. What should he do next? He didn't know. What about his feet? What were they supposed to do? He didn't know.

Dad was getting a little impatient. "Kun..."

"Show me how."

"Umm..."

Dad took his feet and put them on the pedals.

"If you put your feet on the pedals and give 'em a good push, you'll go forward."

Kun did just that, and he lurched forward so suddenly that he almost let go of the handlebars. At the same time, the front wheel wobbled back and forth. He couldn't keep his balance.

"Ahh!"

He toppled right over.

Dad said he had to practice if he wanted to learn how to ride. Supposedly, children who had balance bikes (pedal-less two-wheelers) from the time they were little learned to ride much more quickly. Knowing this, Dad had apparently tried getting Kun to ride a balance bike in the past, but Kun wasn't very interested and always rode his tricycle instead.

Now if Kun wanted to ride a bicycle, it was going to be hard. Dad had had a hard time getting the hang of it when he was little, too, but with a little tenacity, he'd eventually learned how. He tried encouraging Kun by telling him this story.

He asked the woman sitting on the bench if she would keep an eye on Mirai for a few minutes, and she said she'd be happy to. Mirai watched Kun from her stroller, cooing. He was in the middle of the plaza.

"Ahh..."

"It's okay," the woman told her, smiling kindly.

Dad put his hand on Kun's back. "Here we go."

But...

"I'm scared," Kun said. His legs felt too weak to pedal.

"I've gotcha."

"..."

Finally, Kun managed to push on the pedal and wobble forward like an unsteady toddler.

"You're going! Good work, Kun!"

In actuality, he was mostly moving because Dad was pushing him. He wasn't even pedaling. A second later, the front wheel began shaking, and he fell over. Dad got tangled up in the bike and hit the ground, too. He got right back up, though, and worriedly checked on Kun.

"Are you okay?"

"Oww..."

Dad smiled cheerfully and proposed another try. Kun got back on the bike, and his father supported his back again, running forward with him.

"Right, left, right, left!"

"Ahh!"

Dad's chanting was out of time with Kun's feet, and they got tripped up again and fell over. Kun started crying. "I don't like it. It's too scary." But Dad smiled cheerfully and suggested they try again. He told him to press on the pedals harder this time.

For a third time, Kun climbed on the bike and tried following Dad's advice.

"Left, right."

"Ahh!"

The front wheel lost control, and Kun toppled over. He silently pleaded with his father that it was impossible, but Dad just smiled at him.

During the fourth attempt...

"Ahh!"

...the front wheel wobbled, and Kun fell almost immediately with a yelp.

Covered in mud, Kun clung to his father's legs in frustration.

"Bikes are scary!"

"Don't cry, don't cry."

Dad was covered in mud, too. He rubbed his son's back, but the boy kept crying.

"It's scary!"

"Oh dear," said Dad, looking to the heavens.

Just then, they heard the *ding-ding* of a bell.

"?!"

A group of boys riding bicycles had gathered around them. They were the ones Kun had seen playing in the distance, although up

close, they looked older.

“Is this your first time?”

“Are you practicing?”

“Want us to show you how?”

“It’s easy.”

Their questions bore a childlike kindness. Kun didn’t know how to answer. As he hesitated over how to reply, a sob from Mirai caught Dad’s attention. He thought for a moment, then looked back at Kun.

“Do you want the big boys to show you?”

“...”

Kun stared at Dad wordlessly. He was worried about learning from boys he didn’t know, but more than that, he would rather practice with Dad. He wanted to say all that, but before he could open his mouth, Mirai’s escalating tantrum had drawn Dad away.

“Daddy...”

Kun tried to stop him, but Dad didn’t even glance back as he jogged over to the bench. The woman watching Mirai gave him a somewhat harried greeting.

“She started crying all of a sudden...”

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” Dad said, bowing over and over.

Kun had to pick up the overturned bike by himself. Dad had done it for him before, but now, when he tried himself, he found it was very heavy. He wanted to give up right away.

“It’s like you’re kicking the ground,” one of the boys said, demonstrating a motion similar to walking.

“Try coming forward,” said another, showing him how he lifted his feet and moved along. “You have to lift them up hard, like this.”

They were all giving him rapid-fire instructions.

“Okay, we’ll wait for you over there,” they said, casually pedaling off.

Kun managed to get his bike upright and straddle the seat, but he didn’t know what to do next. He’d been left all by himself. He couldn’t ride just because they told him how. Still unsure what to do, he eyed the bench.

“...”

Dad was taking Mirai out of the stroller and comforting her while the woman fussed over how cute she was.

“Daddy...,” Kun mumbled awkwardly.

There was no way his voice could have reached his father. Again, he called for rescue.

“Daddyyy...”

But Dad couldn’t hear over his conversation with the woman. Kun stared in their direction.

“Daddy...”

The group of boys came back to check on him.

“Still here? What’s wrong?”

“Did something happen?”

They noticed the big tears pooling in Kun’s eyes and exchanged glances.

“Is he crying?”

“Are you serious?”

“Why? Why’s he crying?”

They were all shouting at once.

Kun kept staring at Dad. The fat droplets rolled down his cheeks and splashed onto the grass. Even though he was surrounded by other children, he felt all alone. Finally, he couldn’t stand it anymore and shouted at the top of his lungs.

“DADDY!!!”

“Waaaaaaaah!”

Even after they got back to the house, Kun kept crying and thrashing. With his helmet still on and fluids streaming down his face, he shrieked and beat his fists against his father.

“I hate you, Daddy!”

“Ouch, ouch, ouch!”

Dad took the beating. Mom was showing Mirai the old photo album, but every now and then, she checked on the boys with a concerned expression. Dad looked even more worried than she did.

“I’m sorry, Kun. But let’s go again, okay?”

“I’m never riding my bike again!”

“Don’t say that. There’s a first time for everything.”

“No there isn’t! Hmph!”

“Hey!”

Kun shook him off and marched out of the playroom.

“...Whew.” Dad looked at Mom and sighed.

“...Whew.” She sighed back.

“Gah,” Mirai said, pointing to something in the album.

“Hmm?” Mom bent over the picture.

Mirai seemed to be asking her who was in it. By now, the baby could sit up by herself.

“That’s your great-granddad.”

It was a picture of Mom’s grandfather, who had passed away the year before. She gazed fondly at his face. The picture had been taken ten years earlier, when he was in his mideighties. In it, he was straddling a big motorcycle at a company his friend owned. She remembered how he’d told her, somewhat embarrassed, that he’d only taken the picture because its designers had asked him to...

THE YOUNG MAN

Kun dashed into the courtyard and the blinding summer sun.

He tried to take off his helmet but couldn't get the chin strap undone.

"Argh!"

He finally tore it off with brute force and hurled it to the ground in a fit of frustration.

"I hate Daddy!"

The helmet bounced off the roots of the oak tree and flipped over in the air.

"?"

As if by magic, the tumbling red helmet transformed into an old-fashioned leather pilot's cap.

"Huh...?" Kun said, leaning forward for a better look. As he did...

Vroom, vroom, vroom!

With a sudden gust of wind and a light so bright he had to cover his eyes, he heard the earsplitting rumble of an engine. The overwhelming pressure thrust him backward as his hair whipped about and ripples cascaded across his cheeks. His whole body swayed back and forth. If he squinted, he could see a star-shaped engine and a rapidly spinning propeller. That seemed to be the source of the wind. The oak tree was rocking terrifically, as if caught in the worst part of a hurricane, and the gale was steadily pushing it down and back. Kun felt like one of the leaves, about to be blown away.

What in the world was going on?

The instant the thought crossed his mind, the wind ceased.

"Cough, cough..."

His chest heaved as he inhaled a mixture of dust, oil fumes, and incense. When he opened his eyes, he found himself in a dim workshop. One corner was piled with what could have been either junk or parts. Sunlight filtered in through cracks in the wooden walls, illuminating swirls of smoke.

He was somewhere weird again...

That was when—

"...?"

—his gaze landed on something unusual in the parts heap. It was composed of two sets of seven cylinders arranged in a radial pattern,

one on top of the other. Clearly, it was the reciprocating engine for an aircraft. It was just like the star-shaped engine he'd glimpsed a minute ago, as far as Kun could tell. But the one in front of him now was affixed to a stand with a sheet thrown over it and didn't have a propeller attached. It showed no sign of moving. So where did the one stirring up all that wind go?

Tuktuktuktuk...

He still heard an engine, but this one sounded much smaller. He scanned the room for the source. The little workshop was full of huge machine tools that seemed far too big for it. They must have come from somewhere else. There was also a hammock, a smoking coil of mosquito-repelling incense, and a peach set on a sofa.

Sitting atop a surface plate was a partially assembled motorcycle. A nearby can of paint was open, and a ready-made engine with cylinder heads on either side had been positioned on the newly welded truss frame. The noise was definitely coming from there. The fuel tank hadn't been attached yet, so the gas was dripping in from a bottle.

Belatedly, Kun noticed something else.

A man was crouched down with his back to Kun, fiddling with the carburetor. Startled, Kun let out a soft gasp.

"...Oh."

"...?"

The person working on the bike slowly stood up, suggesting he'd heard. He was wearing a collarless shirt stained with oil and sweat, trousers with pockets, and well-worn boots. His frame was tall and thin, with a flimsy towel draped over his neck, and his black hair was plastered to the back of his head. He regarded Kun with puzzlement.

"Did you need something?" the young man asked.

"Ack!"

Kun's eyes darted every which way in a panic, searching for a place to hide.

"Interested in the bike?" The man rested his hand on the unfinished motorcycle. Standing up, he looked even taller and skinner. Kun nervously shook his head.

"Uh-uh."

"Wanna take a ride?"

"Uh-uh."

"You don't have to be polite."

"Uh-uh."

"Bet you wanna."

"Uh-uh."

The man's shoulders sagged in disappointment at Kun.

"So you won't take a ride, eh? Too bad," he said, limping away

from the surface plate. "There's a first time for everything."

"...For everything?" Kun parroted, standing still.

The man leaned against the big door of the workshop to push it open. "Sure is. That's what they say, right?"

He grinned, then slung his jacket over his shoulder and sauntered out of the workshop.

Kun had heard that before. Why would someone he'd never met before say that? Who was this person? Who'd said those words to him and where?

The workshop was hidden in a grove of trees. Exposed water pipes and electrical wires snaked along the clapboard walls, and the road through the woods was roughly paved in thick concrete. It looked like someone had slapped it down in a hurry and then abandoned it when they didn't need it anymore.

Kun deliberated for a moment, then decided to follow the young man.

The road through the woods emerged into farm fields at the top of a cliff.

Kun could see Cape Honmoku jutting out, and in the distance, he could hear children playing at Byobugaura Beach. He could even see the pine trees of Mount Shirahata and, on the far side of the sea, the faint outline of Boso Peninsula.

The Yokohama city tram was rattling along the coastal highway toward Sugita Station. The road was lined with tile-roofed houses, even some with old thatched roofs. But were they really old? This was definitely Kun's neighborhood, but nothing looked the same to him. He didn't see the Negishi railway line, or the Wangan elevated line, or the industrial zone built on reclaimed land. The landscape before him was from a time before any of those.

Of course, Kun couldn't possibly have known that. He was fixated on the way the young man dragged his foot as he walked, like something was wrong with his leg. The toes of his right foot pointed outward, making him bowlegged. After watching for a while, Kun looked up at the dark young man and asked:

"Your leg..."

"What's that?"

"Does it hurt?" he inquired bluntly.

The man glanced at him. "This thing? When I was in the war, I was on a boat that capsized, and that's when this happened."

He made it sound no more consequential than a skinned knee.

"Now that I'm used to it, it doesn't get in my way much," he said, squinting into the horizon.

"..."

Kun looked in the same direction, but there was nothing to see aside from a few clouds.

After they'd walked along the path between the farm fields for a while, they came to an open area enclosed in fencing. The young man entered the two-story wood-plank building next to it without so much as a glance back at Kun.

Kun thought for a moment about what to do. He paced up and down, trying to decide if he should follow or not. He had no idea who the man was... Still, he felt drawn to him. Why was that? After wavering for a long time, he made up his mind and stepped forward.

The closer he got to the building, the more he smelled the distinctive musk of animals. What could be inside? He peered through the dark doors.

"Wow..."

He couldn't help gasping. A bunch of horses were lazily poking their heads out of a line of stalls and staring at the unusual visitor. So this was a stable. The young man called to him from the far end.

"Hey, c'mon in!"

Kun timidly shuffled inside, looking at the horses to his right and left. There were all different sorts, from a tan pony to a big gray horse. They were much more impressive in real life than the ones he'd seen in picture books and videos.

"...I never saw one before."

"Never?" the man asked, raising his eyebrows in disbelief. He strode over to Kun and crouched down in front of him, pressing his face close. Kun adjusted his stance defensively.

"You're talking about the horses?"

"Uh-huh," Kun said.

"Never even seen one?"

"Uh-huh."

"Really?"

"Uh-huh."

"..."

The man knitted his eyebrows and peered silently at Kun for a moment. Kun didn't know what to do and simply stood there holding his breath. Suddenly, the man's face relaxed into a grin.

"Hey, is anyone here?" He called over his shoulder to the far end of the barn. Two boys poked their heads out from behind a blackboard.

"We are!"

"Could you saddle up a horse for me?"

"Sure!"

"One minute, please!"

The two boys disappeared. Before long, they returned outside the barn leading a smallish riding horse with a beautiful chestnut coat. One of the boys tightened the saddle girth around the horse, and the other handed the reins to the young man.

"Thanks, boys." He stroked the horse's head and face fondly with soothing murmurs. At just the right moment, he grabbed hold of its mane and swung up onto its back without using the stirrups, as if riding bareback. Only when he was astride did he slip his feet into the stirrups.

"Wow," Kun said, amazed by the man's skill. He jumped up and down in admiration.

"Come on up," the man invited, holding the horse still with the reins as he extended a hand to Kun. He was leaning down so far, he seemed on the verge of falling off.

Come up? No way. That was impossible. Kun shook his head and waved his hands back and forth.

"I can't."

But the man grabbed his collar all the same and hefted him up.

"Whoa!" Before he knew it, he was sitting on the saddle.

The horse slowly craned its neck around to look at him.

"Ahh!"

The view from the horse's back was alarmingly high. Kun felt like he was on top of a two-story building, and he worried he would fall each time the horse stamped its feet and shifted its weight. If he did fall, he was sure he would get hurt—or worse. He was so dizzy he nearly fainted.

He clung to the man's arm and yelped. "Ahh! Daddy!"

The man smiled wryly. "Daddy? You mean me?"

The horse stomped restlessly.

"Daddy, Daddy!" Kun cried, squeezing his eyes shut and gripping the man's arm tighter atop the swaying mount.

"Don't be scared. When you're scared, the horse gets scared."

Reassuring Kun, he pushed the horse's head gently in the opposite direction.

"Let's go!"

The horse ambled slowly along the path between the fields.

On the opposite side from the cliff face, the hill was carved into terraced fields covered with potato, taro, and sweet potato leaves as far as the eye could see.

Even through the saddle, Kun could feel the rhythmic movements of the horse's shoulder muscles. He sat stiffly, eyes down and reins gripped in his hands as he swayed along.

A few minutes earlier, he had called the man "Daddy." The word

had left his mouth unexpectedly, but as it did, he suddenly remembered something. Dad was the one who had said, *There's a first time for everything*, when they were in the playroom. He was sure of it. In that case, wouldn't that make this person a young version of Dad?

The man calmly struck up a conversation. "The horse isn't scared anymore. He's okay with us now. You're not scared, are you?"

"...A little," Kun answered with his head down.

The man pointed to the distant horizon.

"If you're scared, look way out ahead, not down. No matter what happens, keep looking ahead."

Kun was too nervous to raise his head right away, but after blinking several times and closing his eyes tightly, he managed to lift his face. Very, very cautiously, he forced his eyelids open.

"..."

He saw hundreds of white clouds floating all the way to the horizon. A sea breeze blowing from Negishi Bay mussed his hair pleasantly, and his tension slowly dissolved.

On closer inspection, he noticed something in the distance. Perched on a hill on the far side of a river, he could see a large building.

It was the Negishi Racecourse First-Class Horse Viewing Stand.

"Oh..."

Kun recognized the dilapidated grandstand in Negishi Forest Park. He stared at it in a daze. It was so strange seeing one familiar thing in a completely unfamiliar landscape.

"Wasn't I right? Not so scary now, is it?"

The man's calm voice brought Kun out of his trance. The boy smiled up at him.

"Nope."

The man urged the horse into a canter with a nudge to its side. Kun widened his eyes at the new rhythmic bouncing.

"Ahh!"

The horse ran along a farm road that climbed up and down through the hills. Kun was sure he'd be thrown off this time and squeezed his eyes shut again. Right away, the man leaned toward him.

"Look ahead."

"Oh!" Kun started. Still, he mustered up his courage and lifted his face toward the horizon. The racecourse grandstand was his landmark. He could feel himself calming down even more quickly than before, and soon, he was used to the cantering rhythm.

"Nice. I'm gonna speed up again," the man said, smiling. He took a short breath and gave another nudge as a signal. The next moment, the chestnut horse was free and galloping magnificently through the hills at full speed.

The beat of hooves against the ground and the wind rushing past thundered in Kun's ears.

Before he knew it, Kun was speeding along the coastal highway on a motorcycle.

Vroooooom!

Sunlight glittered brightly off the sea as the motorcycle zipped past the Yokohama city tram slowly making its way north. They were following the highway south around the edge of Negishi Bay.

Kun was fastened securely by means of a leather belt to the man driving the bike. The engine—a twenty-four-horsepower 494-cc horizontally opposed air-cooled two-cylinder BMW—vibrated through him as he hunched over the fuel tank marked with a horse symbol. *Wait a second*, Kun thought, puzzled. *I was riding that chestnut horse a minute ago...* He blinked several times—which sparked the realization that he was now wearing goggles somehow—and peered up at the driver questioningly.

The man was wearing the leather jacket that had been tied around his shoulders before, along with a pair of thick gloves. The strap of his summer pilot's cap flapped in the wind.

“Over there.”

Behind his goggles, the man's eyes flicked to the left, and Kun looked over.

“That's the aircraft company where I used to work.”

As they sped up the hill into the Sugita neighborhood, Kun glimpsed through the trees the saw-shaped roof of a big factory built on reclaimed land. The fourteen-cylinder airplane engine he'd seen at the little workshop in the woods had probably been made at this factory, but there was no sign of life behind the dark, empty windows. To Kun, the building felt dead. The man shifted gears and sped past. Soon, the industrial corpse was far behind them.

They passed a train on the Keikyu Line and continued south on National Highway 16.

On the unpaved mountain road from Tomioka to Kanazawa-Hakkei, the bike tilted far to the side as the man smoothly rounded the sharp curves. He didn't slow down, even on the hairpin turns. As soon as the bike was upright after one curve, it tilted the other direction on the next. Kun's courage was being tested.

They rounded another bend, and the mouth of the Funakoshi Tunnel came into view. The man accelerated toward it.

“Still scared?” he asked Kun in the darkness.

The boy's face was stiff with anxiety, but he tried to sound as brave as he could. "...No."

"Can you see the horizon?"

Kun opened his eyes a little. They were near the end of the tunnel.

"...Yeah."

They flew into the brilliant light. Beyond the town of Tanoura on the other side of the tunnel was the port of Yokosuka. In the past, tall walls had lined the road running along the bay in order to hide the secret goings-on at the harbor. Now the walls had come down, and Kun could see dozens of massive hammerhead and jib cranes beyond the masts of the US Navy ships anchored there. He gaped at the spectacular sight.

To the right, he saw the gantry crane at Berth 2 towering impressively over them. The scale of everything was so huge, he felt as if he had stumbled into a land of giants. They passed foreign military men strolling past the EM Club singing merrily together, as well as long lines of exhausted people hunched over carrying packages. On some corners, they saw children. They were thin and small but having a good time running and shouting.

As the two kicked up a cloud of dust along the Mabori Coast, they passed a battered cab-before-engine truck piled high with machine parts. Kun realized he had seen hardly any other cars or trucks so far. Most of the vehicles were just cows and horses pulling loads. As they passed the rows of old-fashioned houses by the narrow, rocky beach at Hashirimizu and rounded Cape Kannonzaki, even the horse and cow carts became rare.

Instead, Kun saw all sorts of ships on the sea. Every time, he pointed and shouted, "A boat!" He saw a trawling boat with its sails unfurled and the ninth transport ship heading out of Tokyo Bay, and from Kuri Bay, he spotted the silhouette of the Hosho aircraft carrier bound for Uraga with a load of returnees from overseas.

"It doesn't matter what you're riding. Once you learn one, you can ride them all. A horse, a boat, an airplane..."

They followed the contour of the peninsula from the Miura Coast on the east to the western coast. The ocean sparkled under the late afternoon sun as the motorcycle clattered over the country roads.

Kun looked up at the man. "Daddy..."

"What?"

"This is cool."

The man kept his focus straight ahead. "You bet it is. I made this thing myself."

"No, I mean..." Kun was still staring.

"..."

He wanted to somehow let him know how he felt, to explain to

him this unnamed emotion, similar to admiration. But all he could do was stare at him. The man noticed and gave him a brief smile. That was all. When he raised his head again, the sun glinted off his goggles, obscuring the expression in his eyes.

The bike roared on and on past the marshes lining the coast.

Over the growl of the motorcycle, Kun heard another engine. He looked up and saw an airplane. It was so far away, he couldn't tell what kind it was, but to Kun, the distinctive sound seemed to be coming from an engine like the one he'd seen in the workshop, with two layers of seven cylinders.

It was the next morning.

Mom was in a huff because Dad had told her about a problem he was having just as she was leaving.

"How could you forget to turn in such an important document?"

Dad trailed after her. He was dressed in a T-shirt and shorts, like he'd just rolled out of bed. He had worked until late the previous night and woken up only a few minutes earlier.

"Sorry."

"I asked you to take care of it."

"I said I was sorry," he answered pitifully. Kun gazed at him.

"...Daddy?"

"What?"

Kun's eyes shone with admiration.

"Good morning, please."

"What's up, Kun? You're being awfully polite today," Dad replied, surprised.

Kun put on his helmet and tightened the strap under his chin.

"I wanna go to the park, please," he said, trying to imitate the two boys in the barn.

"Huh?"

"I want to ride my bicycle, please."

"What?"

"Please."

Once again, they were at the round plaza in Negishi Forest Park.

"You sure you'll be okay on your own?" Dad asked. He was watching Kun from one end of the bench and bouncing Mirai in the baby sling. Kun turned away, a determined look on his face.

"Uh-huh."

He jauntily lifted up one leg to straddle the bike.

"Oof."

His stubby limb caught on the seat.

"Errgh..."

The same four boys he'd seen riding their bikes the other day were watching him from a distance.

"Oof...ergh..."

He finally managed to get on, set his feet on the pedals, and pushed down hard. As soon as he did, the bike started wobbling, and after a few feet, it crashed.

"Uh-oh," blurted Dad.

Kun picked up the heavy bike.

"Look way out ahead... Look way out ahead...", he whispered to himself, mimicking the young man with the motorcycle.

He kept his head high and pushed down on the pedals. The bike lost balance, and he put both feet back on the ground. He tried pedaling again. He wobbled forward a little farther than the last time, then fell over.

"Ooh... Keep trying, Kun!" Dad leaned forward instinctively, as if he wanted to run over to his son.

Kun fell again and again. Soon, he was covered in mud. Every time, he pulled the bike back up and got on again, panting.

"Way out ahead... Way out ahead..."

The four boys held their breath as they watched him. They thought he might have gotten a little farther than the last time, but immediately after, he crashed to the ground. All of them flinched.

"Ooh...", Dad groaned, putting a hand to his head in sympathy. Only Mirai watched still as a statue from inside her sling.

Kun was drenched in sweat and starting to get tired. He did his best to haul up the bike, but it was getting harder and harder each time. He gathered all his strength.

"Way out ahead... Way out ahead..."

Sweat pouring down his face, he caught sight of something. His eyes widened.

It was the dilapidated, vine-covered grandstand.

He leaned on the pedals, his eyes fixed on the old building.

"Mmph... Rrgh..."

He kept his gaze fixed as he shakily advanced.

"Nngh..."

He jerked back and forth, on the verge of tipping over, but somehow, he managed to stay upright.

Dad shivered and tightened his hands into fists.

"Go, Kun, go!"

Kun kept looking ahead. The front wheel of the bike was still shimmying all over the place, but strangely, it didn't fall.

The vivid image before his eyes wasn't the decrepit ruins; it was the First-Class Horse Viewing Stand he'd seen from the top of the windblown hill with the young man.

“Ahh!”

Another wobble, but he kept pedaling. He still hadn’t fallen.

“Wow—great job!” Dad shouted, waving his fist in the air.

The bike was still upright. Unsteady but upright. Kun advanced incrementally as long as his feet worked the pedals.

In other words, Kun had learned to ride a bike.

“You did it, Kun! You did it! Yeah!” Dad cheered, happily waving at him and jumping up and down beside the bench. He didn’t stop for a long time.

Kun planted his feet on the ground and stopped. “Whew,” he panted.

The other boys rode over to him and screeched to a halt.

“You sure can ride now!”

“It’s easy, right?”

They smiled at Kun, who was still a little stunned.

“Let’s play,” one of them suggested, rolling off before Kun could answer.

He realized he could ride just like them now. A wonderfully pleasant feeling of accomplishment spread from his chest throughout his entire body.

“C’mon!” the boys called. Kun smiled and pedaled forward confidently.

“Coming!”

“It was like I actually saw him move to the next stage of development, y’know?”

Dad was still riding high as he related the afternoon’s events to Mom.

“Wow, Kun! That’s amazing!” Mom ruffled his hair as she showered him with compliments.

“Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!” Kun laughed, flopping down on the floor and paging idly through the photo album with a tickled grin.

“I bet you tried hard because your dad was there cheering you on,” Mom speculated, to Dad’s surprise. He looked at his son again.

“Was that it?” he asked.

“Uh-huh.”

“...”

As Dad watched him innocently flipping through the album, his chest suddenly became awash in a flood of competing emotions. When this image of Kun blended with his own childhood memories, he felt tears pricking at his eyes. He managed to hide them by blinking rapidly a few times.

“...Kids are so amazing. All of a sudden, one day, they’re just able to do things without anyone teaching them how,” he said, sniffing

and wiping away a stray drop with his finger.

"Speaking of which..." Mom said, looking at Mirai nestled in her father's arms.

"What?"

"Mirai doesn't cry anymore when you hold her."

"Really?"

"She looks like she feels secure. I think you've gotten better at holding babies!"

Dad gazed at Mirai's face, then shook his head as if he'd thought better of accepting the compliment.

"Hey, hey, I'm not the one who matters here. Kun's the star right now!" he boasted with a grin.

"Ha-ha-ha. All right, all right." Mom conceded the point with a wry smile. If her husband was more absorbed in Kun's big step forward than his own little one, she would let him be.

"Look, it's Daddy," Kun commented over his shoulder.

"Hmm? Where?" Mom asked, peering at the album. Kun was pointing at one of the older photographs.

"This one."

"Oh, no, that's not your dad. That's your great-granddad."

"No, it's Daddy."

"No, it's your great-granddad. The one who died last year."

"Great-Granddad?"

The picture showed goggles, a motorcycle, a leather jacket, and a workshop in the forest, along with the young man Kun had called Daddy. He had seen everything in the picture with his own eyes.

"Great-Granddad made engines for fighter planes during the war. After that, he was drafted into a corps of kamikaze boat drivers, but luckily, he survived and started developing motorcycles with that company..."

"..."

Mom's voice faded away as Kun stared at the photograph. The young man was looking back at him as if silently telling him something.

"..."

Finally, he nodded in acknowledgment.

"...Really?" Kun smiled a little. "Thanks, Great-Granddad."

He thought he saw the young man in the picture smile back.

The strong summer sun cast dark shadows.

The E233 train with its sky-blue stripe ran merrily along the tracks, blowing its whistle. On the Tokyo Station platforms, the Chuo Line, Yamanote Line, Super Azusa, Tokaido Line, Odoriko, Sunrise Izumo, and Narita Express trains were lined up next to one another. The E233 slid into the station with a blast of its whistle and continued right on through without stopping.

“No!” Kun, dressed in his underwear, flung down a pair of pants. The E233 chugged across the floor of the playroom, which was strewn with discarded shorts.

“How about these?” Dad suggested, holding up a pair of striped pants.

“No! I want the yellow ones!” Kun insisted, grumpily shoving them aside.

“They’re in the laundry.”

Kun crouched down and sulked. Dad took out a pair of navy-blue shorts from the drawer, but Kun looked the other way.

“I want the yellow ones.”

“They’re not dry yet.”

“No!”

“Are you going in your underwear, then?”

“Nooo!”

“Then put these on,” said Dad, seizing the opportunity to pounce on Kun and put the navy pants on him. Unable to move, Kun screamed and thrashed.

“Noooooo!”

The E233 train rolled out of the playroom, crossed an elevated track supported by cookie boxes, document trays, tissue boxes, and planters, and entered the courtyard. From there, it steadily circled up an elaborate spiral bridge made of laundry baskets, blocks, erasers, and measuring cups and arrived in the dining room.

“Woof, woof! Woof, woof!” Yukko barked a greeting, but the E233 kept on going. Wheels screeching, it chugged along an elevated rail made of milk cartons, encyclopedias, toy dinosaurs, and picture books into the living room.

“Owwwww...” Mom pressed her temples as Yukko barked. She was

suffering from the tail end of a headache from the previous night.

“Goo!”

Since the morning, Mirai had been crawling all around the house. She ignored the Keihin-Tohoku train arriving in the living room and looked from side to side as if searching for something she'd lost.

“Are you trying to find something?”

Mirai had learned to crawl before she turned eight months, which was much earlier than Kun. Now that she was mobile, she had to be kept under constant surveillance.

“Mirai-plane!” Mom said, scooping her up and laying her back on the ground to briskly change her out of her romper.

“Let's get you ready!”

Just then...

“Mommy, I want my yellow pants!”

...Kun ran upstairs, clutching his shorts. Yukko followed him up, barking even more excitedly.

“Yukko, hush. My head hurts.”

“I want the yellow ones!”

“Those look nice on you.”

“No, the yellow ones! ...Yukko, shh!”

Venting his frustration on the yapping dachshund, Kun chased the dog around the room in circles. In the center of the ring, Mom gritted her teeth against her throbbing headache and kept Mirai from escaping as she dressed her to go out. Mom had been looking forward to seeing how cute Mirai would look in her brand-new outfit (set aside specially for this trip), but amid all the chaos, she had no time for that. Getting Mirai into her clothes was just a chore, pulling arms through sleeves.

Suddenly, Dad stuck his head up from the bottom of the stairs, holding a mosquito net.

“Time to go!”

“I'm aware of that.”

“We need to put the bags in the car.”

“I said I know!” It came out more sharply than she had intended.

Hanging his head, Dad slunk up to the living room. He hastily picked up all four bags on the sofa and retreated toward the stairs.

“I'm very sorry. I won't talk back again.”

“What's that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing, nothing,” he mumbled, hurrying downstairs to escape.

“Come on!” Why did everyone have to be like this? Mom's irritation was growing.

“I hate my blue pants!” Kun abruptly shouted as he came to a halt. “I want the yellow ones.” He pulled down the blue pair.

“Oh no, don't take them off!” Mom cried in a fluster, grabbing

both his hand and the pants, which she tugged back up again.

"Um, we should probably, uh...", Dad called hesitantly. Yukko scampered downstairs, barking.

"Yeah, we're coming, we're coming, we're coming," Mom said with a sigh. She picked up Mirai in her new outfit and walked down the stairs.

Kun was left all alone. The racket was suddenly gone as silence descended.

"..." Slowly, he mumbled as if to himself, "Do they really love Mirai more than me...?"

No one answered.

"...Do you?!" he shouted, stomping his foot.

"Kun, we're leaving!" Mom called. She sounded very far away.

"I'm not going!"

"What are you gonna do, then?"

"I'm running away."

"What? Running away to the upstairs?"

"Uh-huh! I'm never coming back!"

He turned around and ran up to the top floor. After a minute or two, Mom slowly ascended the dining room stairs.

"Kun?"

But he was already gone, and the living room was empty.

Mom sighed, closing her eyes.

"...Haah."

Bored, Kun slammed open the door to the bathroom, climbed into the empty bathtub, and crouched down to hide. Then, he poked his head just over the brim and shouted, "Kun isn't here anymore!"

He ducked his head and waited for someone to come looking for him.

"..."

There was no response. The whole house was silent.

"Grr!"

He climbed out of the tub, went back to the bedroom, and squirmed into the closet.

"Kun isn't here anymore!" he shouted again before closing the door.

"..."

No response.

"Grr!"

He strode back out of the closet, pouting.

"Why isn't anyone coming?"

He went to the living room and looked down through the rest of the house.

“Huh?”

It really was empty. Even Yukko was gone.

“...Where is everybody?”

The clear whistle of the E233 train echoed uselessly through the silent house. The apparently forgotten mosquito net was leaning against the table.

“Did they leave me?”

A terrible sadness welled up from the depths of his chest, and tears gathered in his eyes.

“Waaaaaaaah!”

They were so horrible to leave him behind! As he sobbed, he grew angrier and angrier. Snot ran from his nose.

“I hate everyone!”

He made up his mind. If that was how they were going to be, then he really would run away.

He hurried down to the dining room, grabbed an orange juice box from the refrigerator door, and shoved it in his backpack. If he got thirsty, he could drink that. He reached into the fruit basket on the dining table and snatched a banana from among the pears and kiwis. He packed those, too. If he got hungry, he could eat them.

He opened the glass door. A young swallow had strayed into the courtyard, but he didn't have time to worry about it. He slipped on his sneakers and walked down to the courtyard. Suddenly...

“Yikes.”

...he heard an unfamiliar voice.

“Huh?” Kun said, looking toward the sound.

Before he knew it, he was standing on the platform of an unmanned train station.

“...Whuh?”

Surprised by this unexpected turn of events, he peered around him. Aside from the single track, the only thing he saw was a big leafy oak tree and an endless expanse of green rice fields. Far, far away, he could make out the silhouette of a farmhouse. He seemed to have ended up at a station at the edge of the world. Did trains really come all the way out here? The swallow he had seen in the courtyard a moment ago was flying off into the yellowing, late afternoon sky.

The voice was coming from a little waiting room on the platform.

“That attitude of yours is a problem. A real problem.”

Kun cautiously approached the waiting room and peered inside.

“...Who's there?”

A sloppily dressed high-school-age boy was sitting on the bench with his legs straight out in front of him and his hands in his pockets.

He stared at Kun through the gap in his long bangs, explaining matter-of-factly:

“Everyone’s going camping now, right? They’re gonna catch bugs and watch fireworks and stay at Granny and Granddad’s house, right? Everyone was looking forward to this vacation. Mom and Dad worked their butts off so you could all have a good time together. You don’t hate that, do you?”

Kun was dumbfounded by the boy’s superior, accusatory tone. Why did he have to say that when they’d never even met before?

“Hey, who are you?” Kun asked again.

The high schooler rambled on without answering his question.

“Which is more important, a pair of pants or a good time with your family?”

“...”

“I think you know. If you do, go tell them you’re sorry.”

“Pants,” Kun replied, glaring at the boy.

“What?”

“I don’t not hate them.”

“Huh?”

“I don’t not hate them!” Kun shouted, determined not to cave.

“I think you don’t not not hate them!” the boy shouted back, equally stubborn.

“I don’t not not not hate them!”

“You don’t not not not not hate them!”

As they shouted at each other, a train came rolling down the lone track. It was an E233 with a sky-blue stripe, but it only had four cars. It slid up to the platform and screeched to a halt. The rusted station sign read ISOGO.

Kun stood stock-still in the entrance to the waiting room, holding his breath as he watched the train. The air cylinder whooshed as the train door opened, and Kun jumped back in surprise. The window where the destination was usually displayed was dark and empty.

Where in the world had the train come from? And if he got on, where would he go? There was no way of knowing without trying it himself.

As Kun was considering what to do, a sharp voice called out to him. “Don’t get on!”

The high schooler was reaching for him to hold him back.

“You’re not really thinking of getting on, are you?”

For some reason, when this boy told him what to do, it sparked a rebellious impulse in Kun. He made his decision and started running just as the whistle blew.

“No—wait!”

He ignored the cry and leaped toward the half-closed doors. He made it in the nick of time.

The E233 slowly rolled away from the platform.

The boy in the waiting room watched it pull out, then slumped back on the waiting room bench with a pained look on his face.

“...What a little brat.”

Except for Kun, there wasn't a single other passenger on the train.

He slipped off his shoes and climbed on one of the seats to take in the sights outside the window. Another E233 rattled by in the opposite direction. *Wait a second*, Kun thought. Hadn't the train been running on a single track before? Maybe they'd reached an area with more than one.

“...Oh!”

On the far side of a number of parallel tracks, he glimpsed a line of green and gray Taki 1000 cars.

“Tank cars!” he shouted, pitching forward until his breath clouded the window.

The sky was lit by the brilliant rays of the sun sinking in the west. No matter how far they went, all Kun could see were train tracks, wires overhead, and electrical poles holding the wires up. It was as if everything else had vanished from the surface of the Earth.

Kun wasn't paying attention to that, however. He was watching an EF210 locomotive engine pull a freight train in front of the tank cars.

“Shipping containers!” he shouted, bouncing up and down excitedly.

The freight train was followed by E259, E233-3000, and E235 trains gliding past, one after the next.

“A Narita Express and an Ueno-Tokyo Line and a Yamanote!”

He hopped repeatedly on the seat. Just then...

Whizzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzz!

An instant later, he felt a peculiar vibration in the air. Even the glass right in front of his nose shivered in fear. What was going on? Surprised, Kun looked out the window and saw an unfamiliar train on the elevated line beyond the passing E235.

“...Oh!” he gasped.

It was a pitch-black Shinkansen bullet train. The knowledge struck him immediately. The windows were glowing red, but because it was so far off, he couldn't make out any other details.

Whizzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzz!

It sped by at lightning speed, leaving eerie vibrations in its wake.

How had he sensed it was a Shinkansen, even though he'd never seen one like it before? Either way, he had to be right, since it had sixteen cars and ran on an elevated track that ordinary trains didn't use. Kun kept staring after the train for a long while, even when it was gone.

“I wonder what model it was...,” he muttered, blinking rapidly.

He had never heard of a black Shinkansen.

“A train is now approaching. Please step back.”

As the announcement rang out over the loudspeakers, the platform sign displayed the name of the station in multiple languages. The E233 with the sky-blue stripe screeched to a stop at one of the many platforms standing side by side under the high ceiling of the immense station.

The automatic doors opened all at once.

“This is Tokyo. Tokyo. Thank you for riding with us today!”

So he was in Tokyo.

Kun gaped as another announcement echoed through the train.

“This train is now going out of service. All passengers must disembark at this station.”

“Huh?”

Startled, Kun hurriedly climbed down from the seat and put on his shoes. He was so flustered, he couldn’t get them on right.

“Oh no! Wai— Ack!”

“All passengers must disembark at this station.” The announcement broadcast again, as if to hurry him along.

“Ho— Ah, ahh! Ngh!”

“The doors are now...closing.”

“W-w-wait!”

He jumped through the door just before it closed. A bell rang, and the train disappeared into the shed. Kun shook himself off and looked around at the station.

Of course, he’d been to Tokyo Station more times than he could count, and he was well acquainted with it. But the Tokyo Station he was seeing now was different from the one he knew. It was much bigger and much more traditional looking, but it also blended the functional industrial beauty of a renovation with user-friendliness. He felt like he had arrived in the airport of some unfamiliar foreign country.

The signboards attached to the soaring classical pillars displayed constantly changing information about departures and arrivals in multiple languages. The rail maps labeled with places Kun had never heard of and the detailed schedules posted below were also displayed in multiple languages. Multilingual announcements flew back and forth above his head. He took the escalator up to the next floor. From there, he could survey all the platforms for ordinary trains. How many were there? At least twenty, he thought—no, thirty. The trains sped in and out on various tracks like a movie played on fast-forward. People flooded off them, and just as many flooded on.

When he reached the top of the escalator, he gasped.

“Ah...”

A white train was slowly gathering speed on a complexly layered elevated track.

He squealed with joy. “Wow, a Shinkansen!”

On the upper elevated track, a double-decker Shinkansen that reminded him of a foreign high-speed train was pulling in. It wasn’t an E4 or an E1. He had never seen one like this before. He looked down to one of the lower tracks and saw another Shinkansen he didn’t recognize sliding into motion. It didn’t match any of the current models. Instead, the futuristic, long-nosed cars looked like F1s.

“I wonder what model that one is,” Kun mused to himself.

The unfamiliar bullet trains opened their doors to admit long lines of people before taking off at intervals of several minutes. Train fanatic that he was, Kun walked along curiously, comparing all the different specimens with an enormous smile.

Ding-dong!

The ticket barrier slammed shut.

“Ouch!”

Kun’s face plowed right into it. Pressing his hand against his nose, he stumbled backward.

The signal light was flashing. Without realizing it, he had wandered up to the Shinkansen entrance.

The ticket barrier admonished him. “You may not board. You may not board. You may not—”

“Duh. I don’t even have a ticket,” Kun grumbled, holding his nose.

The gate kept repeating itself in its emotionless voice: “You may not board. You may not board.” Having no other alternative, Kun walked away.

“I’m going home.”

Pushing against the current of people advancing toward the train, he left the ticket barrier by himself.

“But how do I get home?”

A multitude of people came and went in the enormous station amid multitudinous footsteps and other bustle in the air. The electric placards changed their multilingual postings with dizzying speed, and travelers carrying big suitcases chatted with one another in a mind-boggling array of tongues. Laughter bubbled up and died away.

Kun stood rooted to the spot.

Beyond the domed glass ceiling, the sky was tinted with evening colors. As Kun watched the passing bags and shoes and socks, a chime played on the PA system.

“This is a lost-child announcement,” a voice said.

Kun raised both hands as high as he could and hopped up and

down.

“Here, here, here!”

“We have found a little boy named Daisuke from Gayagaya Ward. If you are Daisuke’s mother, please come to the silver bell to pick him up.”

Underneath an enormous silver bell suddenly dangling from the ceiling, Kun caught sight of a woman with a ponytail clasping her hands to her chest and looking around worriedly.

“Mommyyy!”

A little boy with a shaved head ran toward her, and she bent down to embrace him.

“Dai!”

Kun watched them, stunned.

“...”

He lowered his hands in disappointment. It hadn’t been Mom after all. Just then, a bell rang on the other side of the station, and the voice blared over the PA again.

“This is a lost-child announcement.”

“Here, here, here!” Kun cried again, spinning around toward the voice and jumping up and down.

“We have found a little girl named Sae from the city of Musamusa. If you are Sae’s father, please come to the cat bell.”

Suddenly, there was an enormous cat bell hanging from the ceiling, and a man with a bag over his shoulder and square glasses walked under it, restlessly scanning the crowd.

“Daddyyy!”

A similarly bespectacled little girl ran toward him, and her father squatted down to sweep her up, too.

“Sae!”

Kun watched them in a daze.

“...”

He brought down his arms. It hadn’t been Dad, either. He looked in the opposite direction, disappointed.

“...Oh!” He did a double take.

He’d glimpsed someone in the crowd with a familiar-looking back carrying a baby. That messy hair and meek posture definitely belonged to his father.

“Daddy!” he shouted as loudly as he could.

The man turned around, but he only looked like Dad from behind. In fact, it wasn’t Dad at all. The baby’s face resembled the stranger’s.

“It wasn’t him,” Kun mumbled, his shoulders sagging. “Mommy...”

His gaze shifted uneasily in another direction, and once again, he did a double take.

“...Oh!”

He saw the back of a woman with a familiar hairstyle. He was sure of it—the slightly brownish bob had to be his mother’s.

But then he realized there were seven of them, all with the same bobbed hair. To make matters worse, they were all walking side by side. What was going on?

“Mommy!”

Six of them looked back at once. Mom wasn’t any of them. Kun slumped again in disappointment. Still, the woman in the very center hadn’t turned around. Could she be the real one?

“Mommyyyyy!”

Finally, she turned.

The woman had pointy teeth, and wrinkles on her forehead, and little horns sticking out above her familiar face.

“The wicked witch!”

Kun’s eyes rolled back into his head, and he sank to the ground.

The electric signboards cycled through message after message, and the sea of people ebbed and flowed.

Kun sat down in front of a coin locker and watched them. The sun was low in the sky now, and a lazy afternoon light filtered into the corridor.

He took the carton of juice out of his backpack, peeled the straw off the side, slipped it out of the plastic, and jammed it through the hole. He sucked down the juice noisily, squeezing with both hands, and the sweet-tart flavor soothed him a little. The straw burbled with air when he pulled his mouth away.

He sighed and stared forward.

What were Mom and Dad doing now that he was gone? Were they frantically searching for him? Or were they not looking at all? Had they even noticed he was missing? Where in the world were they, and what were they up to? Kun couldn’t answer. He had no idea what to do.

Suddenly, he raised his head and noticed a picture depicting an umbrella, a bag, and a question mark in one corner of the electric signboard.

“...?”

It was the Lost and Found desk.

LOST AND FOUND

The north end of the dome was crammed with people hurrying home.

Kun stood in front of the Lost and Found sign. He couldn't read it, but he was able to guess its meaning from the pictures. People joined the queue behind him one after the next. The more people riding the trains, the more things getting lost, he supposed.

Kun was terribly nervous. Never in his life had he lined up at a window like this. Was he in the right line? When his turn came, would he be able to explain what was wrong? He fretted about all these things as he waited, but something else was bothering him even more.

"...It's all kids."

Behind him and in front, the line was made up entirely of children for some reason. He guessed the oldest were in their midteens. They were playing games or using the Internet on their phones. He wondered what it all meant. Was this line for children only? The sign didn't seem to say anything about that. If not, did only children lose things?

Above, he saw a stone balcony illuminated with the yellowish light of incandescent bulbs and beautifully decorated with art nouveau motifs. Through the intricately designed dome of steel and glass, he could see the clear, deep-blue sky. The sun had already set.

As he craned his neck, a voice called, "Next!"

"Oh..."

He stepped up to the station attendant, who was clacking away on a keyboard on the desk.

"Have you lost something? What did you lose?"

"Uh, um, I didn't lose anything."

The attendant's hand stopped moving.

"This is the Lost and Found desk. If you have a different problem..."

Kun lifted his head and said exactly what he was thinking.

"I'm lost."

The attendant raised his pale face and peered at Kun without blinking. He was wearing a perfectly pressed uniform with a perfectly dust-free cap. His back was stick straight, and his position on his chair was completely symmetrical. He lifted his left arm like a mechanical

crane, pinched the temple of his glasses, and adjusted them. His pupils were strangely shaped, as if someone had cut them out with scissors and pasted them onto his eyes.

“Lost, are you? So in other words, the lost item is you?”

Kun blinked several times. How should he answer? He decided the man’s words were fairly accurate.

“Uh-huh.”

“I see. In that case, I will ask you several questions required for the announcement. First, what is your name?”

“Kun,” he answered right away.

A little man about the size of a pocket watch emerged from the attendant’s shoulder.

“Ping!”

The little man waved a green flag. From the double row of buttons on his uniform and the double gold braid on his hat, Kun decided he must be the stationmaster. When Kun peered closely, he saw that his face was actually that of a pocket watch.

The attendant typed something on his keyboard.

“Noted. Next, what is your mother’s name?”

“Mom’s name?” *Huh?* he thought. *Wait.* He couldn’t remember. Eyes wide, he pressed his hands to the sides of his head.

“Um... What was it...?”

“Please tell me your mother’s name,” the attendant repeated. Why couldn’t Kun remember? He was sure he knew it. He searched every corner of his mind, but no matter how hard he tried, he just couldn’t remember. He bounced anxiously.

“Huh? What’s going on? Um, I—”

“Bzzz!”

A buzzer sounded, and the stationmaster whipped out a red flag.

“I was unable to make note of it. Next, what is your father’s name?”

“Dad’s name?”

Of course Kun should have known the answer. But strangely, he couldn’t remember. He pressed his cheeks and stomped in frustration. It was on the tip of his tongue, but he just couldn’t say it.

The pocket-watch stationmaster climbed down onto the desk.

“Um, uh—”

“Bzzz!”

The tiny man waved his red flag imperiously.

“I was unable to make note of it. Please tell me the names of your other family members.”

“Yukko.”

“Bzzz!”

Up popped the red flag.

“Please be aware that we are not able to issue announcements to animals. Please tell me the name of another family member.”

“Umm...”

“Please tell me the name of another family member.”

“Uh, umm...”

The pocket-watch stationmaster marched back and forth from one end of the desk to the other, waiting for an answer. Very soon, though, he was tapping his foot impatiently.

Kun tried to say a name, any name, but all that came out was hemming and hawing.

“Um, uh, um...”

His mind was blank.

The flag swished emphatically.

“Bzzz!”

The eyes behind the clockface were icy and sharp.

The attendant spoke quietly. “I was unable to make note of anything. May I cancel the announcement?”

“What’ll happen if you do?”

The attendant’s pasted pupils didn’t move from Kun. They were so still that Kun began wondering if they really had been taken from something else and glued on his face.

“This is a very large station. Every day, many lost children like you come to see us. If no one comes for them, they must board a special Shinkansen located inside a hole,” he said.

Kun gulped.

“...Where to?”

“The destination for children with nowhere to go...,” the attendant said, slowly raising his left hand and adjusting his glasses, “...is the Land of Loneliness.”

At that moment—

“The Shinkansen train will be arriving momentarily.”

—an announcement echoed across the north dome.

Kun flinched and whirled around.

“...?!”

Directly behind him was a large sign reading SHINKANSEN PLATFORM in several languages. The words DESTINATION UNKNOWN flashed across the electric signboard, and the boarding gates opened all at once with a bang. Beyond each was an escalator leading underground, and the bottom was too far down to see.

Not a soul was there, not on the left or the right, and above, the top of the escalator had already vanished. It simply ebbed ever downward. Time and space felt paralyzed. Finally, after reaching an unfathomable depth, the escalator arrived at the lowest level.

This world swam in darkness. Gas lamps glowed faintly, as if the place were trapped somewhere in the past. The immense space was packed with tracks and elevated rails and platforms—ten or twenty or maybe more. Still no sign of other people. The 0-, 151-, and 101-model trains sitting on the tracks looked like rusting ghosts. Perhaps it was a graveyard for ancient trains that had been retired from service.

But someone stood under the lights of the central platform. This place wasn't completely abandoned after all. Maybe the figure was a repairman or a conductor or an attendant or someone else, but when the figure was close enough to make out—

—it was Kun himself in a trance.

“...Huh? What am I doing here?” Kun finally realized what was happening, and his eyes opened so wide, they nearly popped out of his head as they darted to the left and right. A moment ago, he had been in the north dome. Why was he here now? When had he arrived and how?

Then...

Whizzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzz!

“Oh!” he said, turning toward the familiar sound. Uncanny vibrations shivered through the air, coming closer and closer. A slowly growing light glittered in the darkness, and Kun's heart pounded. From where he was standing, the silhouette of the train reminded him of an E5, yet it was clearly different.

The air trembled, and the headlights shone brilliantly as the pitch-black Shinkansen bore down on him. The lights of the eerily shaped front car were two luminous eyes slashing upward like knives, and its slit of a mouth revealed row upon row of teeth. The body of the train was not painted black but densely covered with something that was neither scales nor fur but part of a living creature. The round windows dotting each car glowed red. Slowly, the black Shinkansen decelerated and stopped directly before Kun. The doors unlocked with a pneumatic *whoosh*, and as they slowly opened, the smoke hanging over the platform was sucked inside.

The red light beyond the doors began pulsing as a robotic voice repeated the same announcement over and over again.

“You may now board the train... You may now board the train...”

Who would want to get on this creepy bullet train? Kun, for one, did not want to go to the Land of Loneliness.

He loudly voiced his position: “I don't want to!”

But contrary to his wishes, an invisible magnetic force dragged his legs toward the door.

“Ahh!”

Kun instinctively leaned backward as the blinking light washed over him. He felt as if someone had grabbed his ankles and was

pulling him into the train. The instant before the doors swallowed him up, he thrust out both arms and grabbed on to the edges of the doorframe, managing to plant his feet on the ground just in the nick of time.

“Noooo!” But the invisible force overwhelmed him, and he was sucked into the train. He tumbled forward and landed hard on his face. As he huddled in the vestibule, moaning and clutching his head, the inner door to the seating area slid open. He lifted his head and saw rows of three seats on one side of the aisle and two on the other. They had all been facing away from him, but now they swung around toward him. A skull was plastered to each.

“Ahhhhhhhhh!!”

Kun screamed and sprinted out of the seating area, but once again, the invisible force pulled him back in.

“Noooooooo!”

He ran out again so quickly his legs practically spun. For a third time, he was reeled back in. Somehow, he managed to squirm out.

“Noooooooooooo!”

Just then, the red light stopped pulsing, and the sucking vanished as if it had never been.

“Oh!”

Kun’s momentum sent him rolling out of the car. He leaped up, his face sweaty.

“No! No! No!” he shouted, stamping his foot with each word.

“In that case...” The station attendant’s voice echoed from the ceiling above the platform. “You yourself must provide proof of who you are.”

“I’m... I’m...my mommy’s son,” Kun answered haltingly.

“Who?” the rusting 0-model Shinkansen asked quietly from a distant platform.

Kun placed both hands over his heart.

“I’m...my daddy’s son,” he mumbled, as if talking to himself.

“Hmm? Who?” a rusting orange 101-model train softly inquired.

“I’m...the one who gives Yukko his treats.”

“Who is your mother?” asked a rusting 151-model express train.

“Mommy...doesn’t like cleaning up,” Kun mumbled, imagining her.

“Who is your father?” asked a rusting EF58-model electric locomotive.

“Daddy...is bad at holding Mirai,” he muttered, imagining him.

“I hate Mirai,” the demonic black Shinkansen droned.

Kun looked up in surprise.

“Mirai is... Mirai is...”

Mirai was...the baby he didn’t like. The baby with the strange

name. The baby who wouldn't smile. The baby who liked bananas. And...and...and...

His voice was so hushed and unsure it was almost inaudible.

"She's my...my...my..."

Just then, he heard something far away.

"Gooo..."

"...Huh?"

It was a baby. Kun looked over his shoulder in astonishment. Could it have been...?

Far beyond the black Shinkansen, toward Platform 1, he caught sight of Mirai's back.

"Ahh!! Mirai, why are you here?!"

Before he knew it, he was running.

"Gaaaah..." Mirai crawled around as if looking for something, as she had this morning. What in the world was she searching for? When she looked up, the door to the black Shinkansen was right in front of her.

"Don't go in there!" Kun dashed down the platform to try to stop her, but he stumbled and tumbled to the ground.

"Ahh!"

Mirai hadn't noticed him. She studied the door, then started crawling toward the red light. She seemed completely oblivious to the danger.

"Ahhhh!"

Covered in scrapes, Kun leaped up and took off again as hard as he could. His hat flew off his head. With its elastic chin strap wrapped around his neck, he shouted to her:

"Mirai!!"

Even though he was screaming, she didn't hear him. She kept crawling into the red light. She must have triggered the sensor, because a loudspeaker suddenly announced:

"You may now board the train... You may now board the train..."

At the same time, the light began flashing. Mirai scooted toward the door as if she were being pulled by a magnet. She looked down at her legs in confusion.

"Don't get onnnnnnn!" Kun screamed, squeezing his eyes shut.

"You may now board the train... You may now board the train..."

Mirai crawled into the black Shinkansen train.

The next instant, Kun outstretched both hands in front of him and dove into the red light.

"Mirai!"

As if in a dream, he wrapped his arms around her little body and, in the same motion, hurled himself back out of the car, thudding onto the platform. Once he was free of the red glow, the light at the door

stopped blinking.

Kun lay motionless on the platform for a moment. Mirai was firmly within his arms, cooing like she always did, though she did squirm a bit.

“Gooo...”

They were safe. Kun felt incredibly relieved. He was so glad he’d made it in time. As that thought crossed his mind, he remembered something else.

On that cloudy day when Kun had first met Mirai, Mom had asked him to do something.

I want you to always look out for her and keep her safe.

It was only now, so many months later, that he understood what she’d meant. As soon as he did, a completely new feeling welled up in his chest.

“I’m... I’m...”

He raised his face and loudly declared to the whole world:

“I’m Mirai’s big brother!!”

His voice echoed across dark subterranean platforms.

At that very same moment, in the north dome aboveground, the chime of a bell signaled that he had given the correct answer.

The station attendant readjusted his glasses as if to confirm that he had heard. Immediately thereafter, an announcement resounded through the steel and glass dome.

“Calling Mirai of Isoiso Ward. Mirai. Your brother, Kun, is waiting for you on the underground Shinkansen platform.”

A flock of swallows flapped out from their hiding place and soared in an arc through the air.

On the underground platform, Kun slowly relaxed his face and cautiously opened his eyes.

“...Oh!”

The baby was no longer in his arms.

“Where is she?”

Then...

“Found you!”

Kun looked up at the voice.

“Huh?”

A hand with a familiar red birthmark on the palm was thrust toward him.

Kun hurriedly reached out and firmly grasped it.

That hand belonged to...

“Mirai of the future!”

She was hovering softly in the air right in front of him. The white collar and red scarf of her school uniform flapped in the wind. She

reminded Kun of a bird.

“You’re so silly, running away and just getting lost. I had to look all over for you,” she said with her usual sigh, thinking about the trip back home. “Let’s go.”

Mirai of the future kicked the darkness and slid through the air like an ice-skater, pulling Kun along with her by the hand.

“Ack!”

They zipped up the descending escalator. Although it was very long, they reached the top before they knew it, slipping through the gates just before they slammed shut and flying into the crowded north dome.

“Whooooooooa!”

The passengers scattered as Mirai shot up toward the glass cupola. Onlookers might have mistaken Mirai and Kun for two birds that had strayed into the station.

Only the station attendant knew the truth—that the two figures high above were the little boy who had come to the Lost and Found desk earlier and his baby sister, who had come to find him.

The attendant smiled very slightly as he watched the two of them soar upward, then quickly recovered his blank expression. With his cutout eyes, he surveyed the long line of children weary of waiting and adjusted his glasses.

“Next!”

Mirai and Kun slipped through the glass, emerging outside the north dome, then soared over Tokyo with a trail of light behind them.

Up and up they climbed.

“Wow, it’s a Mirai airplane!” Kun cried excitedly at the nighttime lights of Tokyo spread out below him. But when he saw what was above him, he was confused.

“Huh?”

For some reason, the sky had a ground. He could see a moonlit meadow through the gaps in the clouds.

“Uh-oh! Are we falling?”

“Yep!”

Kun screamed. “Ahhhhh!”

They plummeted toward a lone tree growing in the meadow.

“Do you know what that is?”

“Um...the oak tree in the garden?”

“It looks like it, but it’s actually the catalog of our family’s history.”

“What’s a catalog?”

Mirai focused on the ground straight below, despite the powerful gusts whipping through her hair and clothes.

“You know the cards in libraries that list all the books? It’s like that. Everything from the past, present, future of our house is written on them and filed away. We have to find the card from when you’re living at the house.”

“We have to find it?”

“We can’t go back.”

“What?”

“Going down!”

“Ahhhhh!”

They plunged down right above the tree, passing through a tunnel of rustling, leathery oak leaves. Suddenly, everything was white, and they were inside an enormous globe. The place was surreal, surrounded by the circular index tree.

“Oh...!” Kun couldn’t form any more words than that.

Branches split off from the circle and then divided again and again and again. There were enough to make their heads spin, and at

the tip of each, a single green leaf hung like a sign. At one end of each leaf was a little tab inscribed with what seemed to be an address. It was indeed a catalog. Mirai and Kun dove toward one of the countless leaves, and once again, everything turned white.

A swallow swooped and twirled in circles before them, high up in the sky among piles of clouds drifting slowly by. As the bird tilted its wings to the side, they followed it down. Below the clouds, the evening sun lit up a landscape of rice paddies and farmhouses. Mirai of the future and Kun floated slowly down toward a wooden schoolhouse in the village. A boy stood alone in the large playing field, casting a long shadow as he straddled a small bicycle.

“Can you see the bike?”

“Uh-huh.”

“That’s our dad.”

“Really??”

As Kun watched in surprise, the bicycle crashed to the ground, and the boy toppled over with it. His small chest heaved, and his face beneath his glasses twisted with pain and frustration. Tears formed in his eyes.

“Dad was actually a weak little kid, and he still couldn’t ride a bike when he went to elementary school. Right now, he’s crying while he practices,” Mirai said.

“Daddy...”

Kun remembered Dad encouraging him when he couldn’t ride, either. Without even thinking, Kun cupped both hands around his mouth and shouted.

“Keep trying!”

Mirai did the same.

“Keep trying!”

They faced the boy, who was crying silently into his hands, and called together.

“Keep trying!”

The shadow of the swallow passed over the boy. As it did, the scene distorted, and before they knew it, Mirai and Kun were hurtling through the index tree with its rows of tagged leaves.

“Ahhhhhhh!”

They dove into another.

Mirai and Kun followed the swallow as it circled above the clouds and then swooped down toward a stream deep in the mountains. Among the woods, they could see a lush grassy area, like a playing field.

Next to the fence in one corner, a little boy with glossy shoulder-length hair and a grown-up woman were gazing up at the sky. The

boy was wearing an argyle vest, shorts, and a red scarf wrapped around his neck. He looked just like a little prince from a foreign country. The woman squeezed his shoulder lovingly with a pained expression on her face, but he just kept watching the sky indifferently.

“Who’s that boy?”

“That’s Yukko.”

“Really?!”

“Soon, he’s going to leave the momma dog and come to our house.”

“Yukko...”

The little boy from a moment before suddenly became a puppy. Apparently ticklish, he wiggled as his mother licked him affectionately.

“Yukkooo!” Kun shouted without thinking.

The scene shimmered again, and before Kun knew it, he and Mirai were inside the catalog tree.

“Ahhhhh!”

They flew forward with startling speed and into another leaf.

The swallow wove through gray clouds and dove earthward. The clouds were about to burst with rain at any moment.

“Oh...”

A little girl was standing outside the front door of a house. Kun recognized her right away.

“...Mommy!”

A baby chick lay on the girl’s palm. It was completely still, and drops of blood spotted the ground. The girl’s eyes were swollen from crying as she looked toward the sky. Kun remembered the swallow’s nest above the entryway to her house. Had the chick fallen out?

“That little swallow she’s holding...a stray cat got it. Mom used to love cats, but she’s had a hard time with them ever since,” Mirai said, answering Kun’s unspoken question.

Now that he thought about it, they had a pet dog—Yukko—and not a cat at home. This must have been why.

The shadows of several swallows passed over the little girl. The scene distorted, and Mirai and Kun were in the index tree again. Once again, they dropped into one of the thousands upon thousands of leaves.

Booooooom... Booooooom...

Every time the low sound echoed in the distance, the air quivered.

As Mirai and Kun drifted slowly downward, they saw smoke from numerous anti-aircraft guns hanging in the air above Yokosuka. The vibrations came from exploding shells.

It was three thirty in the afternoon on July 18, 1945, and they were at the Port of Yokosuka. The weather was cloudy. Columns of water flared upward around the battleship *Nagato*. The young man Kun had met at the workshop was floating near the ship as water splashed down on him.

But before all this...

At eighteen, the young man had been drafted to work at a company on reclaimed land in Isogo that manufactured airplane engines. He was told they were developing a new engine and that he would be helping with the project. In the end, though, after many tests, the engine wasn't selected for use, and R & D was discontinued.

After that, the young man worked assembling Sakae 21 and 31 engines manufactured by the Nakajima Aircraft Company. As the military situation grew increasingly tense, older employees at the company—including the most experienced and skilled mechanics—were mobilized as soldiers. The younger employees with less experience were called upon to fill their shoes. As the downward spiral continued, the young man was appointed head of assembly at the age of twenty. He worked desperately to fulfill his role.

The state of the war steadily worsened, and in 1945, with no more engines to assemble, the young man was mobilized as a soldier. He was to be a mechanic in an aquatic unit. The role of these troops was to load bombs into small plywood boats powered by repurposed truck engines and to carry out suicide attacks. They were among the many kamikaze units formed to respond to the enemy's invasion of the Japanese mainland.

The young man went to Omura Bay in Nagasaki for training, then returned to the Yokosuka Naval Arsenal to receive special attack boats under the command of the XXth Special Attack Unit XXth Storm Troop. The day he came back, he gazed up at the bridge of the *Nagato*, which had returned from the sea and was now moored against the cliffs to serve as a floating anti-aircraft battery. It had been painted in a camouflage pattern.

Strangely enough, the US Navy's Task Force 38 attacked the Port of Yokosuka that very afternoon. The *Nagato* was its main target.

Boom! Boom!

Low explosions thundered and shuddered in the distance.

"Huff...puff...huff...puff..."

Next thing he knew, the young man was in the water. All around him, fragments of the ship's bridge bobbed alongside the corpses of soldiers. Not a shred remained of the small plywood boats the young man had received. They had all burned up. Blood seeped into the seawater from an injury to his lower body, but he had no time to figure out what was wrong with his legs. He was already getting

groggy.

“Huff.....puff.....”

He was going to die. He was sure of it. This was the end. He reflected on his short life, and he hadn't accomplished anything. Not a single thing. Could it be ending all the same? As he teetered on the edge of death, the young man gazed up at the sky, and throwing aside all concern for decorum, he screamed as loudly as he could.

“AHHHHHHHHHHH!”

He lifted his right hand toward the sky. Seawater splashed onto his face. Beyond the tips of his fingers, between the gaps in the thick, dark clouds, a beam of brilliant sunlight poured down for just an instant.

“AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!”

He slapped his hand down on the surface of the water with all his might, generating a tremendous splash. Using only the strength of his arms, the young man swam through the debris and body-strewn sea.

Boom! Boom!

The explosions of the shells vibrated through the water.

The swallow slipped through the clouds and down, wings tilted. Mirai and Kun saw a train running alongside a river with a wide riverbed and the roofs of old-fashioned houses packed tightly around a station. Farther out, rice paddies and farm fields extended as far as the eye could see. A short way off the main road, they could see a house that was bigger than all the others.

Although the general region had been bombed, this particular town had escaped serious harm compared with its neighbors. It was August 1946. The shadow of war had retreated.

Mirai and Kun descended slowly through the evening sky.

Kun had seen the stone wall, pine tree, and distinctive imported tiles outside the house before. The nameplate read IKEDA CLINIC, the same place the little girl had taken him to slip a letter inside the leather shoe of Kun's great-grandmother during her shift as a nurse.

A man in a sleeveless shirt and a woman in an apron over workpants were standing in front of the gate, their shadows stretched long in the evening sun. The trial motorcycle Kun had ridden on was parked next to the man. In other words, this was the same young man from before. He was pointing to a tree at the end of the road and saying something to the woman.

“How about we go to that oak over there?” Without waiting for her answer, he crouched down and splayed the fingers of both hands on the ground. He looked up at the woman as if to pose the question for which she had been waiting.

She hesitated for a moment out of concern for his leg, but he

himself didn't seem worried. The woman finally gave in to the inevitable with a sigh and took an upright starting position for their race.

"Ready, set, go!" the man shouted, taking off. While the woman jogged lightly with her apron fluttering, he limped clumsily, his right foot dragging behind him and his upper body lurching forward and back. His hip had been injured in the explosion, and he was clearly at a disadvantage in the contest. After a short time, the woman stopped, stood still, and waited for the man to catch up. Only when he had heaved himself past her with all his strength did she start running again. The man flopped down in the middle of the road under the shade of the oak tree, panting with his arms and legs spread wide. The woman stopped running and walked the rest of the way to the tree. She pushed down the cuffs of her pants and squatted beside him as the man sat up and caught his breath.

"You sure are fast. I thought I might lose," he joked, grinning.

The woman blinked in surprise and covered her mouth softly with her hand.

"...Ha-ha. You're funny."

Mirai watched the scene from high above.

"If Great-Granddad hadn't swum so hard back then...and if Great-Granny hadn't run slowly on purpose now...then we wouldn't be here," she said quietly.

As the woman doubled over and giggled endearingly, it seemed she was already in love with the man.

"You see, all these little things add up to create who we are today."

"..."

Kun looked up slowly at Mirai.

"Today...?" he asked. Today for who?

No sooner had he spoken than the scene wavered and distorted...

It was a brilliant summer day.

Beneath the summer sky, it was just a regular morning in Isogo.

But regular compared with when? For example, the E233 train with the sky-blue stripe had already been retired and replaced by a new model. Several new office buildings and high-rise apartments were visible on the horizon. And quite a few other things looked almost the same but with a slightly different texture to them. But what was the point of listing them all? Everything changes little by little, very quietly, so as not to be noticed.

The stepwise house still stood on the south-facing slope. The orange tiles still covered its roof.

The little tree in the courtyard was a bit bigger than before. No

one had realized, but its leafy branches reached above the roof and beyond the house now.

A tall, slim boy was standing in front of the tree. It was the same high schooler Kun had met in the unmanned train station. He was holding a sporty backpack in his left hand.

"Hey, Big Brother!" someone called to the back of his white T-shirt.

It was Mirai, dressed in her summer school uniform as she climbed the stairs from the front door to the courtyard. The high schooler deliberately ignored her.

"..."

"Mom and Dad are calling you!"

"You know..."

"What?"

"You should at least sit down and eat some breakfast," the boy said, eyeing the banana in Mirai's hand.

"Want some?" Mirai held out the fruit.

"No way," he answered as he jogged down the stairs to the front door.

Mirai watched him absently, then suddenly looked at Kun as if she'd realized something.

"...?"

"...Mirai of the future," little Kun called quietly from below the courtyard.

Mirai giggled and shook her head.

"Uh-uh, you're wrong. The me here right now is living in the present. Which means..." she said, pointing with her banana to the place where the high school boy had been standing a minute earlier, "...do you know who that was a minute ago?"

"...Yeah."

"Hee-hee-hee. That's what I mean."

"...Oh." Kun's eyes widened, as if he'd just realized something.

Mirai waved at him, still holding the banana between her fingers.

"You can get back on your own, right?" she added, raising her eyebrows. "Don't get lost, now."

Kun frowned. "...Are you saying good-bye?"

Mirai almost burst out laughing at her brother as tears started forming in his eyes, but instead, she just smiled and tilted her head.

"What are you talking about? We're gonna be together so much from now on that you'll be sick of me."

Suddenly, Kun was looking down from high above, and as he floated away, the figure of Mirai waving in the courtyard shrank to a speck. When he looked up, he found that he was moving through the catalog tree at lightning speed.

Finally, he reached the place where all the branches met.

Kun saw a huge circle. The past went back so far it made him dizzy, and so did the future. From where he was standing, he could see clearly that the present was just one small dot. All the different types of emotions—from happiness to sadness to suffering to anger—were only tiny points within the now, and as soon as he felt them, another present would be waiting for him. Time moved infinitely on, and new presents sprang up without end.

Kun dove toward his own present.

The brilliant sunlight blotted out everything before him.

Da da da daaaa!

The washer-dryer sang the melody announcing the clothes were dry.

Kun hopped onto the mat on the bathroom floor in his bare feet. The door to the washer-dryer opened automatically with a click, and a pair of very dry yellow pants tumbled softly out at his feet.

“...”

He put his hands on his navy shorts and pulled them down. He'd been saying he wanted to wear the yellow ones all morning.

“...”

For some reason, though, his grumpiness of the morning felt like no more than a distant memory. He thought for a moment, then pulled the navy shorts back up.

The door of the washer-dryer swung shut with a bang, as if marking the end of that episode. Kun took a deep breath and looked down through the house contentedly.

“...”

He had finally found his way back to the everyday world he had missed so much.

The hatchback door of the Volvo 240 was open. Mom and Dad were loading up the car with a tent, a gas stove, a cooler, an LED lantern, a butterfly net, a box for the bugs they caught, a bag full of clothes for Kun and Mirai, and all the other things they would need for camping and visiting family.

Yukko had been sprawled lazily across the passenger seat but suddenly turned his head toward the back seat, perked up his ears, and started listening to their conversation.

“Is your headache gone?”

“Finally.”

“Take care of yourself.” Dad smiled as he heaved a bag into the back of the car.

Watching him, Mom commented, “...You've gotten nicer lately.”

“Me?”

“You didn’t used to be like that.”

“Used to as in when?”

“Before Kun was born.”

“Oh, that long ago?”

“You were always anxious about work.”

“So what about you?”

“Me? How have I changed?”

“You don’t get upset as easily.”

“Really?”

“You used to be on edge all the time. You’d get worried about everything.”

“Okay, stop. Don’t make me remember.”

“I never thought we’d end up like this.”

“It’s gotta be the kids.”

Mom and Dad stopped loading up the car and peered past the luggage to the back. Mirai’s car seat and Kun’s booster seat were lined up next to each other. Beside one lay a toy train, and next to the other was a toy bee. Filled with emotion, Mom and Dad quietly looked at the little playthings. Suddenly, Dad asked:

“Do you think I’m more of a father now?”

“A little.”

“Just a little, huh?”

“What about me? Am I more of a mother?”

“A little. But you’re not perfect yet.”

“A little is fine. As long as I’m not the worst.”

They sidled up to each other and gazed into each other’s eyes.

Dad gave Mom an unaffected, honest smile. “Hee-hee-hee-hee.”

Mom gave Dad a beautiful, sunny grin. “Ha-ha-ha.”

Yukko lolled on the passenger seat. After listening to them for a few moments, he turned back around and sighed.

“Haah.”

It wasn’t relief, but it wasn’t contempt, either.

They sure are close.

When Kun came downstairs, he saw that someone had put the mess of train tracks on the floor into the toy box. Mom and Dad had tidied up the whole house.

Suddenly, he looked down into the playroom and stopped cold.

“...?”

His eyes met Mirai’s as she sat all by herself in the middle of the deserted room.

“...”

Kun walked over and stared down at her. She stared right back up

at him.

“Goo,” she grunted, crawling toward him. Kun took off his backpack, searched through it, and pulled out the banana.

“Want some?” he asked. Without waiting for an answer, he peeled it.

A very interested Mirai reached out a hand. “Gah.”

Kun broke the banana in half. “Here you go,” he said, extending one half toward her.

She grabbed it from him. Bananas were Mirai’s favorite as she was being weaned. She smooshed it between her fingers, opened her mouth wide, and took a bite.

Kun looked up slowly toward the courtyard.

“...”

The leaves of the oak tree were lush and vibrant. It appeared to be an entirely ordinary tree, but now that he knew it was a library containing the entire past and future of his family, it felt special to him. He was sure he had seen in a book that trees lived much longer than humans. *It’s been watching us for a long time, and it’ll keep watching us for a long time, too*, Kun thought to himself. What was going to happen far, far in the future of the future? He tried to imagine.

Then...

“Kun! Mirai!”

“We’re ready to go!”

It was his mom and dad, shouting from the entryway. Kun took a deep breath to give a hearty call back. But before he could...

“Goo!” Mirai answered cheerfully.

“...?”

Kun peered into her face, his head tilted. He wondered if she had seen him getting ready to answer their parents and imitated him.

Mirai noticed the attention and looked back at him. For a minute, they stared at each other. And then...her face broke into a huge smile.

Kun caught his breath in surprise. It was the first time he had seen her make such an expression. It wasn’t a smirk or a little grin. It was a magnificent, humongous smile. It charmed him utterly, and for a minute, he just stared at her in an affectionate trance.

“...”

As he watched her beam, he felt all the hard, tense feelings inside him melting away. At the same time, he didn’t want to let her beat him. He decided he would return the gesture in spades.

“Yaaaaaay!”

He grinned as wide as he could, shaking his head and showing all his teeth like a lion. Mirai froze for a moment in shock, then erupted again.

“Gaaaaah!” she squealed, shaking her head and smiling even

wider in an imitation of Kun. Of course, she was a baby, so she had no teeth to show.

No, wait... A closer look revealed two little teeth popping up on her bottom gums.

“...”

The sight filled Kun with happiness and left him completely content.

Mom and Dad called again.

“Time to go!”

“Let’s get on the road, everyone!”

Kun took a deep breath, smiled broadly, and shouted back joyfully:

“Coming!”

(The End)

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